

STAR WARS™

JEDI

FALLEN ORDER™

EA





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A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

Part One: A New Journey

Chapter 01

BRACCA

If asked about Bracca, most people wouldn't recognize the name. Those who did, would probably call it what it was - a junkyard planet. However, some were fortunate, or not, to call it home. Not a good one at that.

But it was still home.

Cal Kestis belonged to the latter group. Bracca had been his home for five years and he had hated every second of it.

Right now, he was doing what he used to do every other day - salvaging parts from a wrecked Star Destroyer from the Clone Wars. Cal tried not to think too much about those. That was why he focused on his music instead. It gave him a sense of peace and balance, just like his Master used to say. His thoughts were interrupted when someone tapped on his shoulder. Cal turned around only to see a familiar face. It was Prauf.

"Listen, I don't want to upset your rhythm Cal, but the boss wants a word", he said.

Cal nodded and followed Prauf. "Sure". The Abednedo was his only friend in Bracca. They got along really well and Prauf knew better than to ask Cal about his life before Bracca... Before the Empire.

"Could be good for us", he added.

Their boss was a beat-up droid. A loyal, yet annoying, worker for his masters from the *Scrapper Guild*.

"Here he is chief", Prauf said.

"An error has been detected on line Ten-A. Hauler clamps are jammed", the droid filled them in. He sounded even rustier than he was. Cal wouldn't have said a droid could sound rusty, but that was his boss for you. "I need two workers to climb up and secure the cables".

Cal shook his head “No... That’s not an easy maneuver. It’s too risky”.

“The guild will double your pay for this shift”, the droid informed.

Prauf got excited. “Come on, Cal... Little extra score, that couldn’t hurt. Huh?”

Cal was reluctant, but he nodded. “Okay”.

The Abednedo was thrilled. “Alright, let’s go!” he chuckled.

Cal and Prauf had to climb their way over crates and platforms that were being salvaged by other workers just like them.

“This way!”

“Right behind you”, Cal shouted.

The young human felt trapped. His childhood had been very different from what he was going through now. The galaxy was dangerous, especially for someone like him. But Bracca provided a good hiding place, from where he could wait for a signal. A signal from the Jedi Order.

That signal hadn’t come, though. Even after five years of constant waiting.

Thus, Cal didn’t have much choice other than getting used to his new life.

He had three basic rules to survive:

Don’t stand out;

Accept the past;

Trust no one.

But he had another rule that was essential: *Don’t reach within.*

Cal followed his friend to the top of a platform from where he could see several miles of the scrapyards. Seeing a planet like this, turned Cal’s throat into a knot. How many times had he called Master Tapal’s classes boring and, sometimes, pointless? He had taken it all for granted.

At that precise moment, a massive Lucrehulk battleship was being brought down out of orbit for scrapping, while

several TIE fighters soared the skies, spreading fear and dread to those on the surface.

"Will you look at that... a Separatist ship. Haven't seen a Lucrehulk in ages", the Abednedo said.

"Yeah... ages", Cal agreed, in a sad tone.

"Breaking her will be big money..." Prauf exclaimed. "Alright, let's go".

Cal continued after Prauf, but a collapsing platform cut him off from his friend, who barely made it up.

"Hey, you okay?" Cal asked as he got up.

"Yeah, I'm good. Ladder's out though. You're gonna have to find another way".

"No problem, I'll improvise", Cal said.

"See you there, pal".

Cal leapt off the platform and onto a long downward ramp, gliding down to the next level and landed on top of a new barge.

A droid noticed him. "Debark this barge immediately. You are not approved trash".

Cal chuckled. "I'm trash, just not approved trash".

With no linear passage to reach Prauf, Cal had to resort to his special skills to swing dangerously across deep chasms on ropes, as well as to climb walls. Finally, he saw his friend while clambering up a series of horizontal red I-beams that led to Cal's destination. The hauler clamps.

Each one was suspended on a box. And each one impossible to reach without climbing along the bottom over a precipitous fall from the barge.

Prauf was on top of the clamps, but he couldn't do anything from there. Cal knew it had to be him to climb across to reach each hauler.

"Cal! Use the manual override lever below!" the Abednedo shouted.

Cal swiftly climbed across the three clamps, manually overriding all of them. While working on the second clamp,

one of Cal's hands slipped. Prauf gasped, but Cal was able to hold on.

After completing the task, Cal climbed to the platform above the hauler clamps.

Prauf gestured to Cal to follow him. "Come take a look at this! It's a Jedi fighter. What a score! It's a real scrapper's payday. I mean, this heap's been here, what, four years?"

Cal remembered very well how much time had passed. "Five", he said.

Prauf was looking at the fighter wide eyed, hands on his hips. "Whoever flew this went down in a blaze of glory. Those Jedi... a real tragedy. I've always said they couldn't all be traitors".

There had been many days when Cal wanted to tell Prauf the truth. But sharing that knowledge was dangerous. For both of them - for Prauf because he was friends with a Jedi and for Cal because he was the Jedi.

"Yeah, maybe", he said softly. He walked up to the fighter and wiped away the dust from the Starfighter's wing, revealing the Order's emblem. He realized that part of the ship's R2 unit was still inside the fighter.

Prauf kept talking. "I guess today it's just our lucky day. The Empire's gonna get a lot of good material out of it". He thought about that. "Yep. Here we are scrapping these ships from the war just so they can turn around and make new ones. What a racket, huh? All of us risking our necks for the bosses. And the pay was better during the Republic too!"

"Hey, you really should watch what you say", Cal warned him.

"Listen to me. A finder's fee like this could be your ticket off this soggy rock".

"What makes you think I want out of here?" Cal asked. Yes, Bracca was probably the worst place Cal had ever been, but it was discreet. And in this new era, discretion meant safety.

“Come on Cal. You’re a young guy. You don’t wanna end up like me. Eventually you gotta move on and live your life. Find your destiny”, Prauf laughs.

They didn’t notice that one of the machines that was keeping the platform afloat, had retracted its lock and flown away.

“Whatever you say”, Cal wanted to stop talking about it. “Hey, we should get back down”.

Prauf, however, didn’t want to let the subject go “You’re not listening to me”.

Suddenly, one of the cables supporting the platform snapped violently.

“What was that?” Prauf asked, alarmed. “Cal, look out!” he shouted.

At that moment, the entire wing of the ship they were standing on broke, and Cal and Prauf were sent downward. Cal flew off the edge, but fortunately, he was held by the feet by a tangled mess of wires. Prauf caught himself on a metal tube. However, the rain turned his grip into a precarious situation.

“Prauf, you okay?”

“Cal!” the Abednedo shouted. “I... I can’t climb up”.

“Prauf! Just hang on!”

“I’m slipping!”

“No, don’t let go!”

Prauf lost his grip and flew off the platform toward the mouth of the Ibdis Maw – a giant sarlacc-looking creature that consumed anything that went near it – right below them.

“Prauf! No!”

Cal didn’t have time to remember his rules of survival. He could only see Prauf falling to certain death. Instinctively, his hand reached out to the Abednedo, while his mind reached out to the Force - that light inside him. As he reached out, he sensed the light inside him growing bigger, but not quite as it once used to. Nevertheless it shone

bright enough for Cal to freeze Prauf in place. The Abednedo was floating in the air, with nothing visible to support him. He was clearly confused, but happy for being alive.

As a droid-piloted platform flew beneath them, Cal released his invisible grip on Prauf and he fell onto the platform, but an I-beam from the crumbling wing of the ship collapsed on top of him right after.

"Whoa!" Prauf cried.

Cal jumped down to the platform to help his friend.

"You okay, Prauf?" he asked.

"I'm alright! Just pinned down".

Cal ran to the piloting station, where he noticed that the droid responsible for the moving platform was inert and slumped over the controls. Cal tossed the droid's body off the side and took control of the controls.

"Pilot's gone!" he shouted. "I'll get us out of here, just hang on".

One of the Ibdis Maw's enormous tentacles hit the platform, sending them careening off course.

"This thing is barely flying! Hold on!"

Cal was able to quickly and 'safely' crash land on the surface of Bracca. The platform was still intact and a safe distance away from Ibdis Maw's grasping tentacles. Cal ran over to Prauf and began to lift the I-beam off of his friend.

"Prauf, you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah", he said, between deep breaths.

Straining, Cal lifted the I-beam enough for Prauf to crawl out. With Cal supporting Prauf, the two began to move away from the wreckage.

"We gotta move, come on".

"Prauf was still confused about what had happened above the Ibdis Maw.

"Yeah..." he sighed. "The hell happened? What was that back there? Was it...was that you? What... that... that was the Force, wasn't it?"

“Just forget what you saw, okay?” That was bad. Very bad. “Please trust me”.

“No but I... I’ve seen them. I’ve... I’ve seen the stories. I’ve heard it. There’s... there’s bounties out on people like you!”

“I know!” Cal shouted, already impatient and only wanting for Prauf to shut up about it. But he wasn’t angry at the Abednedo. He was angry at himself.

“I know”, he repeated, now gently.

“Yeah... alright. We need to be careful”.

“Yeah”, Cal said softly.

As the significance of what Cal had done for him was finally impressed on Prauf, the two made their way to the train that took workers out of the scrapyard and back to their quarters.

Chapter 02

PASSENGER CAR TRAIN

Cal and Prauf were inside a dimly lit train, much like a subway. Both were clearly shaken by what had just happened. Cal's scar on the right side of his neck itched a little. It made him remember the day when...

"You holding up okay?" Prauf looked at Cal.

Cal snapped out of his thoughts "Good, yeah. You?"

"Yeah, heh...Cal...I been workin' with you some time now. I've never seen you do anything like that before. We've been through some hell together. So...I know the risk that you took for me. I just...I don't know how to repay you".

"Don't mention it", Cal said. He then added "I mean it".

"O - Oh, you don't have to worry about me. But, this place...it's not safe. Maybe you should, you know, disappear?"

"Just gotta head back to my place, grab my bag. Tabbers owes me a favor".

Prauf thought about the name. "I heard he was up on, uh... Nar Shaddaa?"

"Yeah. You won't be seeing me for a while, Prauf".

Prauf understood the danger of the situation Cal had gotten himself into to save him. At least, if the kid escaped Bracca, there was a chance he would start a new life in a better place. Finally, he nodded "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Okay, Cal".

Cal had not let himself relax since the incident. Fortunately, it had happened with Prauf, whom he knew he could trust. That was why he let his guard down for the moment and let his mind drift off and fell asleep.

When he woke up, Prauf was no longer next to him on the bench. Instead, the Abednedo was walking through the

vestibule to the next car train.

Cal was confused. Why would Prauf walk away like that? Was he hiding something?

Cal called out to his friend "Prauf?"

There was no answer and the young human decided to follow him.

"Prauf, wait up! Where you going?"

Cal moved between each compartment of the train that left the salvage sites with the workers from his shift. It used to be packed with workers. This time, however, the further Cal walked, the fewer people the cars had. After a few of them, it was just him and Prauf. At least, until his friend disappeared behind a final door.

Cal tried to open it several times, but it wouldn't budge. Suddenly, the sounds of the train faded away and, once he turned away from the locked door, he realized he was no longer inside the train.

He was standing in a Star Destroyer's corridor.

What? Cal thought, confused.

The white and sterile walls and floor of the hallway only made it worse for his already loud-beating heart.

The alarm blared and the hallway got filled with red lights. Several aperture doors closed in front of him. He reached out with the Force, opening the first door in front of him.

If the hallway had made his heart race, what he saw on the other side of that door, made his heart skip a beat. He fell on the floor.

It was his old Master. The towering Lasat moved toward him. With an outstretched hand, Jaro Tapal used the Force to lift Cal off the ground, suspending him in the air, in front of him.

"Apprentice", the deep voice of Jaro echoed on the walls. "Mark well and listen:"

"Master?"

Master Tapal ignored Cal. "Trust only in the Force".

With that, the Master dropped the Padawan on the ground, the impact shaking him off his dream. Or was it a vision?

When Cal *really* woke up, he was relieved to see Prauf right next to him. But his faint smile faltered as he realized that the train had stopped moving.

"Train is stopped", Cal said.

Prauf nodded. "Yeah, something's going on".

The blast doors of their car opened, letting two stormtroopers enter. They had their usual white armor and blasters ready to shoot.

One of them spoke to the passengers. "Everybody up. Identification ready".

The second one spoke as well "Move out and line up".

Prauf whispered to Cal "It's probably just another contraband inspection".

Something told Cal that his vision, or dream, meant that this was no ordinary inspection.

Chapter 03

BRACCA

If his dream was any indication that this was no ordinary inspection, then the Purge troopers standing outside the train further confirmed that thought.

Cal and Prauf exited the train and, alongside with the other passengers of their car, they walked between the assembly of troopers. They wore black armor as well as red visors on their helmets which were shaped differently than other 'casual' stormtroopers.

Once all the passengers were out, the Purge troopers organized all of them into a line.

Cal looked at the sky with the familiar sound of a TIE engine. Indeed, there was a TIE landing near them along another, bulkier ship - a black Imperial Shuttle.

From the modified TIE Interceptor emerged a lithe black clothed silhouette, while a larger, almost brutish figure in similar clothing walked away from the shuttle in their direction.

Both figures stopped once they reached the assembled workers. They looked them up and down.

The slim woman asked out loud. "Is this all of them?"

One Purge trooper answered her immediately. "Yes, Second Sister".

She continued gazing at them, her own face covered by a mask. "We seek a dangerous fugitive. This is no common anarchist, but a devotee of the treasonous Jedi Order. Failure to turn over this traitor will result in a charge of sedition. Turn yourself in or everyone present shall face summary execution.

The troopers aimed their weapons at the scrap workers to emphasize their threat. It had effect since only then the

workers realized the severity of what was happening.

Prauf stepped out of the line.

"I think it's time someone came forward".

Cal reached out to his friend to stop him, but ultimately couldn't. Prauf took yet another step forward.

"I, uh...I - I've been working on this heap a long time. Way before the war. We refit and rebuild ships".

Cal slowly reached beneath his poncho and grabbed something while Prauf continued talking.

"Best in the galaxy. Then came the Empire. And engineers...became scrappers. The workers...just started getting worked".

Cal couldn't believe Prauf was facing the black figures with such courage. "Prauf..." he said, softly.

"We all know the truth. We're just...too afraid to say it."

Prauf turned around to face the workers, while the Second Sister stood quietly but menacingly behind him. "To the Empire," he lifted his chin "we're all expendable".

Without missing a beat, the Second Sister replied "Yes. You are".

She ignited her red lightsaber and pushed it through Prauf's chest.

Cal couldn't hold any longer, even if it was too late "No!"

The young human ignited his own blue lightsaber he had hid beneath his poncho and charged against the Second Sister, who merely ignited her second blade, parrying Cal's strike.

"Look at this", the Second Sister said, a smile in her voice. "A lightsaber".

With a powerful Force push, the Second Sister easily threw Cal off balance and sent him flying into the arms of the second black figure. She held the young human by the neck and lifted him over the edge of the cliff.

"I found the Jedi!" she said as she let go of Cal.

Luckily, Cal was able to land on a moving train. The landing hurt a lot, but he was alive. But it wasn't over yet.

As he lifted himself up, he saw two stormtroopers ahead of him. They had turned around at the bang of him falling.

"Hold it! Don't move. How'd you get here?"

Cal held his hands in front of him, his lightsaber still clasped in his grip. "Easy now..."

"Got a stowaway", the other one said.

"Hey, you don't need to call this in".

"Quiet!" said the first stormtrooper.

Cal ignited his lightsaber and struck down the two stormtroopers. He knew he had to get off that train.

A quick look around revealed that he was inside a cargo train, which meant that it would be crawling with troopers.

Well, now that the secret is out, Cal thought as he looked at the blue humming of his saber, I can use this.

He had not used the saber for five years now, which meant that, as he fought his way through the train, the skills passed to him by Master Tapal slowly returned to him, especially the ability to deflect laser blasts, first randomly, and then by precisely sending back from whence it came.

As he used his Force skills, he noticed what he had already felt when freezing Prauf. It felt like his connection with the Force was... damaged, broken apart.

As his mind returned to the image of Prauf being impaled by the so-called Second Sister, he found himself on the top of the train, deflecting a laser blast from yet another stormtrooper. For the first time in a long time, he used it as a weapon by freezing the trooper in place, only to cut him down with his blade.

Cal leapt off the train onto the deck below him, cutting down one more trooper that had pointed his blaster at the Padawan.

As he approached the train, an Imperial Pursuit Speeder began firing at him. Cal was able to evade the laser bolt by taking cover behind the cargo shipments.

Cal tried to outrun the speeder by jumping onto the next car but it blew the couplings out. Cal attempted to continue

but it was almost impossible, as he reached an area without cover. The speeder hovered in the air, victorious, in front of him.

Suddenly, a long, thin, starship raced by the train, blasting the Imperial vehicle out of the sky.

The starship's door opened revealing a person behind it.

"We're here to help!" cried the woman.

"Who are you?" Cal shouted back.

"No time! Keep moving! We'll pick you up when we can".

The door closed and the starfighter sped up, leaving Cal alone. But not for long, as the Second Sister's TIE Interceptor appeared in the sky. Cal had to keep fighting his way through the train, as the two starships fought above him.

Just as Cal reached almost the end of the train, the familiar Imperial shuttle flew right overhead, blasting the train car Cal was standing on.

"Oh, this can't be good..." he said.

The young human slid off the car. The long starship circled around to try and catch him before he ran out of the train.

"Jump now!" shouted the woman.

Cal leapt off, barely making it to the ramp. He clung to it with everything he had. Just as Cal was about to lift himself up, the Second Sister's Interceptor shot at the ship, sending Cal tumbling away in a death-certain-descent.

He barely survived by holding onto a hovering droid that slowly let him fall on top of a platform. If only he could...

His possible future plans were thwarted as the Second Sister's TIE landed a few meters ahead of him. The lithe figure emerged out of the ship.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, igniting only one of the blades of her dual lightsaber.

Cal followed her example, igniting his own and waited for her move by positioning himself on a defensive stance. For the first time, he feels the energy radiating from her. Darkness. Rage. Cold.

Master Tapal had told him about the dangers of falling to the Dark Side of the Force. This woman, it seemed, she had succumbed to it.

"I recognize that stance", the Sister said. "Perhaps you've had some training after all. Who was your master, Padawan? Someone I killed, perhaps?" her voice, even though it was slightly muffled by the ominous helmet, still managed to rise. "What Jedi gave their life so that you might live?"

The dark figure charged forward with her blade, but Cal was able to block. However, as she continued to strike confidently, it was evident that they were not fighting. Instead, the Sister was toying with the Padawan, who was obviously and utterly outmatched.

With ease, the dark silhouette charged, blocked and counterattacked Cal.

The young human was about to be defeated and cut in half, when the elongated ship emerged, letting loose a salvo of laser fire that separated the Second Sister from Cal, thus buying him more time to escape.

Cal ran to the ship, the woman pulling him inside. She started firing at the black figure, who blocked and deflected each bolt with an incredible ease. She began to sprint toward the ship.

More and more desperate, the woman kept shooting faster and faster, but the Sister effortlessly dodged or blocked her attacks.

"Captain!" the woman shouted at the bridge.

The door began to close and, as it did, the Second Sister leapt into the air, ready to strike the ship. The doors closed in time but a red gash was immediately struck through it.

Cal, who still had his lightsaber on, and the woman ran to the cockpit, where a four-armed Latero was flying the ship. Abruptly, the Second Sister landed in front of the cockpit window. She reached out to the Force, disrupting the Latero's piloting.

The ship began to swing wildly and when it seemed they were going to crash on the surface of the cursed junkyard planet, a particularly brutal twist jerked the Sister off the ship, sending her flying off.

Panicked, but with regained control, the Latero was able to reach the outer atmosphere and then made the jump to hyperspace.

The Latero captain looked over his shoulder at Cal after making the jump. He noticed Cal' ignited lightsaber.

"Okay, shut that thing off and grab a seat".

Cal took a deep breath as his gaze focused on the familiar but almost forgotten blue colors of the hyperspace. They were safe. For now.

He turned his lightsaber off. "Thanks for the help. Who are you people?"

The woman spoke first. "My name is Cere junda. And this is my captain, Greez Dritus".

"How ya doin?" the Laceor asked, playfully. "Yeah, the *Mantis* is my ship but you better pay attention to this lady over here". He was pointing at Cere.

"So..." she asked. "Who are you?"

"Cal. Kestis. Who was that back there?"

"An Imperial inquisitor", Cere explained. "She's a Force user hunting down Jedi survivors. And now that she knows who you are... she will not stop until she destroys you".

"How do you know so much? And why'd you help me?"

"We track Imperial communications. We heard the Inquisitors were heading to Bracca. So we made our move".

"Oh yeah?" Cal was suspicious. "What's the bounty on Jedi these days anyway?"

"That's gratitude for ya", Greez chuckled.

"Look, I get it. You've been surviving on your own for so long that it's impossible to trust anyone. And it's what's kept you alive. But this is about something bigger... than just surviving."

"Like what?" What did this stranger want with him?

"Like rebuilding the Jedi Order".

"You two? Anybody else?"

"Oh, we're not good enough for you?" Grezz asked sarcastically in what Cal was beginning to understand was the entire mood range of the Latero.

"The Jedi Council?" he asked Cere.

"They're... gone".

"Oh...so I'm all you've got", Cal said, finally understanding. They needed him.

Cere turned to Greez. "Captain. Set a course for Bogano".

"Aye, aye", he answered, walking back to the bridge.

"In the meantime," Cere said "try and relax. Go. You're safe. For now".

Cal nodded and wandered around the *Mantis*, trying to process everything that had happened in the past few hours alone. Eventually, he drifted off. In his dream, he heard the echoes of some of Prauf's last words before almost getting eaten by the Ibdis Maw:

*You gotta move on and live your life. Find your destiny...
Cal look out!*

Part Two: Bogano

Chapter 04

ABOARD THE *MANTIS*

Cal woke up suddenly. He had the feeling that someone was watching him. He opened his eyes at once, only to find Greez standing over him, looking a bit concerned.

"You were talkin' in your sleep", he grunts. "Weirdo".

Cal didn't know why the Latero had the necessity to add the 'weirdo' comment. One should always keep comments like those to themselves.

The young human got up and decided to take a walk around the ship. Since they were still in hyperspace, there was no one else to go.

When Cal entered the main room of the *Mantis*, he found an old seven-string hallikset leaning against a small table. He takes a seat and touches the instrument.

As soon as Cal touched it, he sensed the instrument's history, as an echo in the Force itself. Through his psychometric ability, he's able to start playing a melody that someone must have played it before.

"That song", Cere said from behind. "I wrote it. Years ago". She looked at him "You touch an object and witness events connected to it. You feel its history".

"It's an..." Cal tried to explain it "... echo in the Force from the object".

"Not many Jedi have that skill".

Cal was confused. "How would you know that?"

"I was once a Jedi. But not anymore", she explained.

"Do I know you", he asked. She didn't look familiar, but it was good to be sure.

"No. But I knew your master. Jaro Tapal. He was a true guardian of the Republic".

"He was a hero", Cal said, letting that sink in himself. "Listen, something happened to me during the Purge. I survived, but...my connection to the Force was damaged. When I meditate, if I let my guard down...I lose control. It's like I'm back in that moment when..."

"You survived, Cal", Cere interrupted. "And you're not alone. Not anymore".

Cal nodded in agreement, even though he wasn't sure if that was true.

Over the intercom, Greez's distinct voice sounded across the ship. "We're coming up on our destination".

Cere and Cal joined the captain in the cockpit as the *Mantis* exited hyperspace.

Bogano was a terrestrial planet and, from space, it was evident that apart from the main mass of water of the oceans, the land also had mesas and wetland, which gave the planet a mix of colors from blue and green to purple and brown.

In a few minutes time, the *Latero* landed the long starship on a hill on the green and grassy planet. Around the hill, several ravines, carved by the water for millions of years, were now exposed to the sun and wind.

The ramp extended to meet the soil. Cere and Cal left the ship.

"This is Bogano. A Jedi I knew discovered it before the Purge. You won't find it on any maps".

Cal turned around to face the woman. "The Empire doesn't know this place exists?"

"No".

"So?" Cal asked. "What's the plan? Hide out here?"

"We're done hiding, Cal. See that structure over there?"

Cere pointed towards a massive cylindrical building in the distance. To Cal, it appeared to be an archaic version of the towers of the Jedi Temple on Coruscant.

As far as Cal could see, it was the only apparent structure in the planet, which meant that the planet's natural

environment was relatively untouched.

"I believe that Vault holds the key to rebuilding the Jedi Order. The problem is that it requires someone strong in the Force to pass its test".

Cal now knew why they had taken him here. "And since you're not a Jedi anymore, that's why you need me".

"I know you don't trust me...and I'm not really sure I trust you. But we have a common enemy. And a common cause. I'll share more of my plan after you reach the Vault". Cere turned around and climbed the ramp to the ship. "But, until then, there's someone here I think you should meet".

Cere closed the door behind her. "May the Force be with you".

Cal was left thinking about those words. *Who, or what, did he have to meet? The Jedi who discovered the planet? Some other Jedi 'recruited' by Cere and Greez as well?*

Guess I'm looking for a Jedi. But if there's already one here, why does Cere need me?

Cal decided that the best way to figure out why he was there was to find his way to the Vault.

He ran to the ravines and started to climb them, but the Vault didn't appear to be much closer than before. After reaching a clearing, Cal found a place to meditate.

He was always afraid of what he would find waiting for him as he meditated. His mind always wondered to that day. The day everything changed.

But there was something about this planet. It was embedded in the Force unlike any other. Not stronger nor weaker. Just... *different*.

Cal closed his eyes and tried to relax. But the events of five years ago managed to catch up to him. Cal started to strain, trying to get rid of that feeling of dread, and loss and...

He opened his eyes and took deep breaths. Still the same experience. Was his connection with the Force broken for...

"Beep-be-be-beep".

What was that? Cal looked around but only when he looked down, did he see a tiny and curious red and white droid.

"Hey," Cal looked at the droid's serial number "BD-1. I'm... I'm Cal".

"Boo-beep".

"Uh, yeah. I'm okay... I'm just... I'm looking for someone".

"Beep?" the droid asked immediately, his tiny metal body leaning forward.

"No, not you", Cal answered. "I'm searching for, uh, a Jedi. I think..."

BD-1 started jumping and beeping in a tremendous excitement.

"Hold on, you know the Jedi? What do you know?"

But the droid, too excited to listen to the young human, scurries away into the ravines.

"Wait! Hold on!" Cal shouts, left behind.

BD-1, who seemed to be running into the ravines, was actually running toward a control panel. He interacted with it and a bridge connecting Cal's clearing to another, closer to the Vault, extended.

Cal was amazed and impressed. "Did you just slice that? Thanks!"

BD-1 raced across the bridge and Cal followed him, scaling a wall to get to the top of a canyon. From there, the journey to the mysterious Vault, to which they now have a clear view, *should* – emphasis on should – be linear.

"That's the Vault Cere mentions", Cal said to the droid "Whoever I'm supposed to find must be waiting there".

Let's hope so, Cal thought.

BD-1 projected a map, revealing that he had been tracking where Cal and he had already been. He highlighted the Vault, clearly helping Cal visualize how he was going to reach it through the difficult terrain.

That certainly helps, Cal assumed. "Thanks, BD".

Following the droid's map, Cal navigates the natural chasms easily, the only difficulty coming from the climbing

itself and the wildlife which was rather violent. But, after a few minutes of running and jumping, Cal and BD-1, came across an old building embedded in the stone of one of Bogano's many platforms.

Cal tried to find a way around it. Eventually, the Padawan found the hermit's abode. Unfortunately, there were a few native creatures inside.

BD-1 jumped into action, to which Cal followed by turning on his lightsaber. The creatures are quickly disposed of. However, BD-1 damaged one of his legs in the combat.

"Hey, that was pretty brave. You okay?" Cal asked.

BD-1 limped away, sad at the state of his leg. "B-b-b-b-eeeeep".

"Wait! I can help you with that".

The droid turned around, hopeful.

"Will you let me?"

The droid beeped excitedly again and jumped into Cal's arms.

"Ha, ha... okay".

Amazed and charmed by the droid's personality, Cal carried it to a nearby work station, quickly repairing its leg.

"Your scomp link is busted, but this should help you get moving for now". Cal welded a few connections. "Okay, try that".

BD beeped excitedly, jumping again.

"Welcome back, buddy", Cal smiled.

BD-1 climbed to Cal's shoulder and both left the abode. They keep following BD's map to the Vault.

"So, how'd you get here", Cal asked BD.

"Bee? Beep-boo-bee".

"Don't remember?" Cal asked. That was new. "I've never known a forgetful droid".

"Bee-beep-bee!"

"Can't argue with that", Cal smiled.

The journey to the Vault was long and grueling - full of dangerous animals, steep climbs and poorly-maintained

bridges.

Eventually, Cal arrived at a long cave. The cave was almost impassable and the only way through it were the rigid walls. Sensing the Force echoing on the walls, trying to find a way through, Cal was instead surprised by a white flash and then, transported back to the Star Destroyer.

Except now, he was in a training room and he was young again. The same age when...

"Try again", a familiar voice told him.

Cal looked up and saw his late Master Tapal. The Lasat was standing on top of a grey platform, hands behind his back, wearing his usual Jedi uniform. The Padawan, however, had just fallen on the ground.

"It's difficult, Master".

Jaro looked at Cal the same way he always did. With candid eyes, followed by the familiar deep, but soothing, voice.

"Yes, the path is difficult. It may seem impossible, but with persistence and the Force as your ally, you will overcome any obstacle. You will master any path. Now, do what you must to reach me".

Several platforms detached from the metal walls and floor and floated across the room, creating an artificial wall that was not unlike the one the Cal was facing in the real world.

Cal leapt off his own platform and started running along the first meters of floating platforms above the floor.

"Good", his Master said. "Now, reach my position".

The platforms created a new wall, this time leading to his Master. Cal jumped again, running to his destination. However, when is almost reaching for it, he snapped out of his daydream, finding himself on the other side of the real wall.

"I did it", Cal said, excitedly. "With persistence, and the Force as my ally..."

"Boop-beep?" BD asked.

"Just remembering old tricks".

Cal and BD-1 pressed on but, after the remembered lesson, the path became much simpler and easier to transverse.

Soon, they arrived at the foot of the massive ancient Vault.

“Race you there?” Cal asked BD.

The droid beeped excitedly and started climbing up.

“Whoa! It’s on!” Cal laughed and followed the droid.

Before they reached the top, however, BD-1 jumped back onto Cal’s shoulder.

“Boo-bee-boo”.

“Okay, okay, you probably would’ve won!” Cal said as they reached the entrance to the mysterious Vault. “Probably”.

Chapter 05

THE VAULT OF BOGANO

BD jumped off Cal's back as he walked closer to the door. On its surface were inscribed several ancient symbols. Would the Jedi he was looking for know the meaning of those markings?

In the middle of the door, there was a white marking. It looked a lot like a fissure, a crack. Whatever it was, Cal felt a pull to that particular detail.

While BD watched with interest, the young Padawan placed his hand on the door and reached out with the Force. Instantly, the door opened, revealing a dark hallway.

Here we go, Cal thought as he stepped inside.

The entrance was tight, so Cal had to struggle to fit and move forward. After a few seconds, Cal found himself in a massive room.

Amazing... Cal thought.

Around the room were massive half-moon-shaped doors. Both those and the walls were adorned with designs similar to the etchings and symbols that were on the entrance door.

Cal walked around, his feet splashing on the water that had found its way inside the Vault, and noticed a circular slab of stone. It had a circular cavity in the middle. Cal wondered what it was for. As they approached it, BD-1 scanned it.

Suddenly, as if he remembered something, the little droid freezes and its projection lights started flickering. "You alright, BD?" Cal asked.

BD didn't answer, and instead pointed his projector forward, displaying a hologram of an elderly dark-skinned man. He was dressed in the usual robes of the Jedi Order.

Cal didn't have time to figure out what was happening when the hologram of the Jedi began to speak.

"Well done, whoever you are. You have passed the test I left behind, and gained access to the Vault and this recording. One of many encrypted logs stored in the droid. I am Master Eno Cordova. I may not know your name, but I know your purpose. The fate of the Jedi Order lies in your hands.

"This... place. This... Vault is a sacred temple. Built by a vanished civilization known as the Zeffo. Meditating here I was granted a premonition through the Force. A vision of doom. I have placed inside this Vault a Jedi holocron, containing a list of the names and locations of young Force-sensitives throughout the galaxy".

Cal couldn't believe it. *This... This* was the way they could rebuild the Jedi Order and bring peace and freedom back to the galaxy. The sensitive children were the key to that rebirth...

Meanwhile, the hologram message continued playing.

"Ahead you will find the inner chamber of the Vault but... also another test. I can only trust this holocron to someone who has followed my path and understands.

"Seek out the hidden tombs of the Three Sages. And learn to perceive the mysteries of the Force as the Zeffo once did. In this droid you will find everything you need to succeed on this journey. Go to the Zeffo homeworld. There you will find peace in the eye of the storm.

"Good luck, Jedi. And may the Force be with you".

With those final words, the message disappeared and Cal realized that there was no Jedi waiting for him. But that didn't mean that the journey had been in vain. He turned around and looked down at BD-1.

"I guess you were the someone I was supposed to meet".

"Beep!" the droid said in agreement.

Cal didn't fully understand what Master Cordova had told him yet. He sat on the circular slab of stone.

"You know", Cal told BD-1, "I've been alone for...a while now. Without any... purpose. Just hiding. It's no way to live. Not for a Jedi. Or a droid. Maybe Cere was right. Maybe we're done hiding".

The droid looked puzzled.

"Hey", Cal said while getting back on his feet. "You wanna meet some, uh... Friends of mine?"

The beeped louder than ever in clear agreement "BEEEEEEEP!"

Cal smiled and they both made their way out of the Vault. Once outside, Cal called Cere.

"I think I found what you wanted me to see", Cal said.

"Be-bee-boop?" BD interrupted.

"Sounds like you did", Cere said after hearing the droid. "We'll be waiting".

Cal slid down the Vault's hill, with BD on his shoulder, but as they reached the ground, they spotted a massive frog-like creature emerging from a swamp puddle at the base of the hill. It was an Oggdo Bogdo, one of Bogano's apex predators.

Cal turned on his lightsaber and, after a few successful attacks, Cal is able to slay the beast. He got only a bit scratched to which BD answers by giving him a healing stim that Cal gladly accepted.

With time, the young Padawan was becoming more and more proficient with not only the lightsaber, but he felt that he was restoring his connection with the Force itself. Or maybe, the connection had never been broken - he just hadn't been able to surpass his trauma and find balance within himself.

He would have to meditate on that. Eventually.

The duo were making their way back to the Mantis, when BD spotted a mural on a wall. The little droid ran to it and scanned it. Cal watched with interest.

As sudden as the first message, BD projects a second one, with Master Eno Cordova as the focus as well.

“My friend”, the old Master said through the hologram. “It appears the Zeffo had some interest... in Dathomir. It’s strange. For such a peaceful culture to have any fascination with a place so... dark”.

The message ends and the hologram disappears. Cal takes a mental note to the possible necessity of going to Dathomir. He had heard about it when he was a kid. Master Cordova was right. It *was* dark.

Eventually, they found the *Mantis* and Cere. She was waiting for them on the ramp.

“You passed the test”, she said, a smile on her face.

“So, you knew about BD-1?” Cal asked.

“Come one board”, she gestured to the door. “We’ll talk inside”.

Chapter 06

INSIDE THE *MANTIS*

"Oh, BD-1, this is Greez. Hey, Greez!" Cal introduced the droid.

Greez pointed at BD with two of his right hands. "What is that?"

BD-1, who had climbed to the sofa, beeped defiantly. "Beep. Beep-beep!"

Greez took it personally and shoved the droid off. "Get off my sofa! Go! Get off my sofa! Get outta here, get out!"

"That is BD-1", Cal repeated. "He's with us".

The Latero took his four hands to his head. "I don't care who he's with! Do you have any idea how hard it is to get oil stains out of potalli-weave fabric?"

"Not really".

"I hope you found something better than this droid!"

"Oh, calm down Greez", Cere interrupted. "He did. Tell us, Cal".

Cal sat down on the stairs that led to the other parts of the ship.

"The Vault was built by an ancient civilization called the Zeffo. A Jedi named Eno Cordova hid something inside of it".

"What did he hid inside?" Cere asked.

"A holocron. From the Archive. It contains a list of Force-sensitive children".

"The next generation of Jedi", Cere was excited. "I knew it! Ah, Cordova, you old fool..."

"You knew him?"

"Yes! A long time ago... I was his apprentice. Cordova was a loner. That little droid and I are probably the only one that know about Bogano".

Greez was getting left behind in the conversation. "Hold on, wait a minute... A holo-what?"

"A holocron. It stores information but only accessible to Jedi. Hang on, I think I have one around here".

Cere ran to the back of the living room and, from one of the several cabinets, she opened one and retrieved a holocron from it.

Cal recognized it immediately. It was impossible to forget the blue crystal cubes adorned with several gold lines. Cere handed it to Cal.

"Use the Force".

Cal closed his eyes and concentrated on the holocron on his hand. The holocron floated and several parts began rotating. The corners started floating from the cube and a hologram of a bearded Jedi Knight was projected from the holocron.

"This is Master Obi-Wan Kenobi", said the hologram. "I regret to report that both our Jedi Order and the Republic have fallen..."

Cal didn't need to hear the rest. He shut it off and the holocron returned to the shape of a cube.

"With that list of Force-sensitives, we could rebuild the Jedi Order and defeat the Empire".

"Okay", Greez said, optimistic "No problem. Let's get it".

"Except the holocron is hidden inside the Vault and to get it, we have to follow Cordova's path. He mentioned something about the planet Dathomir and a... Zeffo homeworld".

"Alright, well, where are we going? I'm just asking 'cause I was thinking of maybe making some food", Greez asked.

"Look", Cal looked at Cere. "Before we do anything, I need to know something. How come you're no longer a Jedi?"

"I had an experience that..." Cere didn't feel comfortable with Cal yet to share the whole story. "Changed my perspective. So, I... cut myself from the Force".

"But you still want to rebuild the Order?"

"I believe that rebuilding the Order is the best chance we have against the Empire. What do *you* believe?"

"I believe I can't keep hiding from the Empire, so I don't really have a choice".

"Cal, as long as you're alive you will always have a choice. Are you with us?" Cere asked.

Cal looked over at BD-1 who nodded enthusiastically.

"We're in".

"Twee-dee-doo!" BD said.

"Dathomir or Zeffo? It's your choice".

Cal stood up and walked over to the ship's holo-map. Greez had highlighted the planets Zeffo and Dathomir.

After a few seconds of thought, Cal chose Zeffo.

The *Mantis* rose from Bogano's surface and, a few moments later, it jumped into hyperspace.

After that, Greez thought it was a good idea to engage in small talk.

"Ya know, my piloting hasn't been this good since I graduated first in my class at the Lateron Space Academy".

Cere frowned. "I wasn't aware Lateron had an academy".

"Yeah, it was new... back in the day. You probably don't get around that area much".

"So, what did you train on?"

"Name it. Fighters, freighters, short range, long range, whatever. I flew circles around everybody".

"You flew freighters in circles?" Cere asked.

"Yeah... it's all they really allowed me to do".

Cal smiled at the thought of seeing the Latero flying in circles needlessly.

"I was so good though. You shoulda seen me!"

Part Three: Zeffo

Chapter 07

ABOVE ZEFFO

After a few minutes in hyperspace, Cal sat on the cockpit chair next to Greez.

"Must be hard watching all your friends get gunned down", Greez said. "I mean, ya know... purged, or whatever".

"Bee-beep", BD beeped in a sad tone.

"What?" Greez asked. "It helps to talk about it, right? No?"

Cal didn't want to answer that and was glad when Cere did.

"Yes. It was difficult, but you must cope, not forget. We must remember the mistakes of the past and change things going forward to make sure they never happen again", she said.

Cal had the feeling that the answer was more for him than for Greez.

"Sounds like you're not too sure everything is gonna work out", the Captain said softly.

"I'm not. That's why adaptation is important. Whether it's a course of action or an idea... we all have to be ready to change".

The four of them spent the last minutes in hyperspace silent until it was broken by Greez.

"Time to land", the Latero said.

The ship dropped out of hyperspace just above Zeffo. From space, they all can see a hurricane raging on the planet's surface.

"Heck of a storm brewing down there. This might not be the best time to land!"

"Something strange..." Cere said, working on the comms console. "Those winds are interfering with our comms".

Cal thought about what Cordova had told him in his message back on Bogano. "Hey, Cordova mentioned something about peace in the eye of the storm?" he checked his own console. "Well, I can make out a settlement in the middle of it".

"Then we have to get there", Cere said.

Greez seemed a bit annoyed about having to fly his ship in such harsh conditions. "Copy that".

The *Mantis* entered Zeffo's atmosphere and the ship started shaking, but not as bad as the view of the storm had suggested.

They could already see the surface. It was mountainous, with several patches of snow throughout the landscape.

"Couple bumps ain't gonna kill ya, kid", the Latero laughed. "Unless the wind picks up..." he added softly.

"Beep beep bo-beep!" the droid said, concerned by Greez's words.

"Can you tell that bucket of bolts to keep his opinions to himself?"

"I'm sure everything's under control..." Cere said, her voice calm as ever.

"Course it's under control, it's just a little tricky", Greez explained, in a clear effort to steady the ship.

The *Mantis* made a break for the little settlement on the surface, struggling against snow and strong winds.

"Okay. Hold on, hold on!" Greez cried.

Cal, who had already strapped himself to the chair, grabbed the seat's armrests with a strong grip.

The landing, although bumpy and shaky, was successful.

Cal took a deep breath and let himself relax. As he looked through the windshield, he saw that the landing pad belonged to some kind of factory or an ancient space port of some kind.

"Perfect landing. Heh", Greez congratulated himself. "Greezy money, baby!"

"I'm still getting a lot of interference on the comms", Cere said. "It's gonna take a minute to get them back up".

Cal quickly got up from his seat. "I'll search for signs of Cordova in the meantime".

"Good. I'll be in touch once I crack this".

Cal and BD-1 made their way outside but Cere called after him.

"You did good work on Bogano. The more information we gather on Cordova and the Zeffo, the closer we'll get to stop the Empire".

"I've heard of ancient cultures", Cal said "but don't know much about them".

"I only knew that Cordova was obsessed with the Zeffo. Believing their teachings to be important. I, too, was intrigued by the mysteries of our galaxy".

"I can see you two have been through a lot", the young Padawan lowers his head. "It's not easy..."

"No, it's not, but I think of those who believed in me at one point. If I give up on myself, then I give up on them. I'm sure you have a few of those".

Cal's memory drifted back to Bracca. To all the time they spent together, especially after work, in the pub with all the neon lights.

"Prauf...a friend on Bracca. He sacrificed himself so I could live", Cal said softly.

"He believed in you. A lot of people depend on you, even if they don't know it yet". Cere eyes locked with Cal's. "Keep going, Cal. For Prauf. For everyone".

Cal nodded. "Like you said earlier. We must cope, not forget..."

"Exactly. Now, you better get moving. There's a lot to learn out there. Good luck".

Chapter 08

ZEFFO'S LANDING PAD

After Cal and BD-1 left the ship, they looked around them. There wasn't much to be seen. On their right, there was an old structure that looked like a warehouse and a path that led to a mountainous area.

Following through the path, the young Padawan came upon two large, rat-like monsters, which were chewing on the remains of an already dead stormtrooper. Those were the scazz - the native scavengers of Zeffo.

"Watch out, BD. They don't look friendly".

The two scazz attack Cal, but he cuts them down easily with his lightsaber. After he was done, his comms started to work again.

"Cal, can you hear me?" The voice belonged to Cere. The transmission had a lot of static interference, but Cal could still understand what she was saying.

"The Empire", Cal said. "They found Zeffo".

"If they were following the *Mantis*, we would've been swarmed already".

"Could they be looking for the tombs as well?"

"Let's hope not. Just got our comms working. I'll try and do the same workaround to crack into theirs".

The comms line closes as Cal ventures inside a small cave. There was something calling him there.

While using his lightsaber to see the path ahead of him, Cal reached a dead end.

There's something here, he thought.

Cal looked around, on the walls and the ceiling, but found nothing. Only when he looked at the floor, did he find a piece of brown cloth. He picked it and felt its history.

A white flash on the back of his mind was accompanied by the sound of a baby crying. Cal's heart went cold as he saw the story develop right before his eyes until he opened.

He was back in the dark cave with BD-1. He told the little droid what he had seen.

"A mother used this fabric to keep her child warm. They were on the run from something".

From there, the pieces weren't too hard to pick-up. The Empire was on Zeffo. And like this mother and her baby, many other people would be running from their white-armored troops of terror and death. Because there was only one thing the Empire was good at.

Killing.

Cal kept going. He needed to find the settlement, which didn't take him long - he just had to follow the sound of blaster fire.

At the entrance of the village, Cal found three desperate stormtroopers trying to kill a scuzz. But their attention quickly changed to Cal when he showed up, lightsaber ignited.

"Shoot him!" one of the stormtroopers said.

Cal reflected their shots back at them, killing the one who had told the others to make the unfortunate decision to try to kill a Jedi.

"How's he doing that?" one trooper asked.

"We can't lose, can we?" the other asked.

Prophetically enough, Cal struck down the other two troopers.

Cal kept moving forward until he sensed yet another pull from a corner.

He saw what appeared to be an old bag. He touched it and the voice of the woman carrying her baby returned.

But she wasn't alone. There was a man's voice as well.

The man was telling her wife to run with the child. Even though the woman didn't want to go alone, the man forced her to take that chance by trying to lure a few

stormtroopers to another location by creating a distraction. The woman, uncertain if she would ever see her husband again, protected the baby with a brown blanket and ran to the caves. At the same time, in the background, he saw Imperial troopers and officers putting up Imperial flags, detaining the natives and making them take down the statues of the people and entities they looked up to.

Cal got up. If following the path made by Cordova was the path to destroying the Empire, he felt even more certain that he was his responsibility to take it.

Knighthood or not, with the Jedi Order active or not, he *was* a Jedi. Not because he had the Force or because he wielded a lightsaber. He was a Jedi because he helped people. It had taken him a long time to realize that, but he wasn't going back now. There *was* no going back. He would try to help as many people as he could. If it was the will of the Force to let some of these people die, that was fine. But he wasn't going to stop trying.

Never again.

Cal entered the settlement, trying to slip between the shadows, walking undetected.

When one of the stormtroopers noticed him, he tried to shoot the young Padawan, but Cal was able to dodge and took down the trooper.

Because of the shot, the trooper's comms line opened up, asking if everything was okay. Cal put the helmet on his head and answered, trying to change his voice.

"Everything is okay. Just a rat trying to jump me".

There was a silence on the other end, making Cal suspect that they had realized it wasn't a trooper talking.

"Roger that. Proceed".

Cal sighed and threw the helmet down the cliff. Time to move on.

On the door of the building he was hiding behind – and where we found the now dead trooper – there was an

Imperial poster exposing the benefits of Imperial occupation.

"It's all lies," Cal told BD. "The Empire just wanted this land".

The young Padawan was able to continue most of the way undetected, slipping away in the shadows. After leaving the settlement behind him, Cal climbed a path to a natural cave, marked to mining by an Imperial warning signal. Cal ignored it and got in.

Once again, he had to use his lightsaber to light the way.

Then, out of nowhere, BD started playing a message from Master Cordova.

"My friend, in the rotations since I left Bogano I've uncovered more about the Zeffo than I once believed possible..."

Ok, Cal thought, *that was helpful*. The young human could even hear the tone of irony inside his own mind.

The duo kept walking until the cave ended and they were back in the open air. Below them, several stormtroopers were standing guard. Cal could hear them clearly.

"Years on this rock and now artifacts to show for it", one of them says.

"You could put in for a transfer", another one adds.

"They don't give transfers. You know that".

"Then focus on the job and let the officers worry about artifacts".

They're looking for the artifacts of the Zeffo, then.

Cal decided to move on in his own path when the troopers saw themselves suddenly the target of a phillak, an horned beast that charged against them.

Let nature take care of them, Cal thought.

Beyond the settlement, Cal noticed a mountain with a top shaped like... was that a face? The young Padawan couldn't believe it.

"Whoa... That gotta be one of the Zeffo".

"Bwee-boop!" BD-1 beeped in agreement.

Ahead of them was what looked like a command post. It was empty and Cal decided to check it out.

In the center of the room, there was a control panel. Cal activated it and a holographic message from a stormtrooper appeared in front of him.

"In accordance with the Emperor's will, we've occupied Zeffo, redistributing its inhabitants. This project has failed to yield significant data or relics for Project Auger", the trooper said.

Project Auger? Cal thought. That's interesting.

In the meantime, the trooper continued. "Its electromagnetic winds have rendered the bulk of our mining technologies useless. Meanwhile, more stormtroopers lose their lives to dangerous fauna. We will not be able to fulfill our directive here. It is my recommendation that we disband the project and leave a token outpost to keep the scavengers from stealing our technology".

The message ended, leaving Cal with even more answers. At least, if the relics were still in Zeffo, the Empire hadn't found them. Seeing the imperial efforts thwarted like that gave him a smile.

That might also mean that the Empire didn't know about Cordova's own efforts to find the relics himself.

Cere's voice came over the comms.

"Cal, the Empire has pinpointed your location. You need to move fast".

"On it. Thanks".

Chapter 09

ZEFFO RUINS - TOMB OF EILRAM

Cal and BD-1 slid down a huge ramp of ice all the way to what looked like ruins of an ancient village. There was no sign of stormtroopers. Right before them, there was a structure not unlike the one he had found on Bogano. This one, however, had a literal storm contained within its own walls.

Cal remembered Master Cordova's words about finding peace on the eye of the storm. Maybe that was it. Maybe, *that* was the storm. Cal called Cere. "There's a storm up ahead. Something about it crippled the Empire's equipment. I can feel something pulling me there, beyond the storm".

"Follow it. Let the Force sharpen your instincts".

"All right, I'll do my best".

Cal climbed the several rows of stairs that led to the main structure. Inside, a large, golden ball sits in the middle of two pillars, with the storm rotating around it carrying with it, several pieces of debris. Cal looked around him and asked himself how the storm could be confined inside the ruins.

Find peace on the eye of the storm.

Cal took a deep breath, braced himself and ran through the impossible, yet astonishing, storm.

The ball is standing on a small dais, which works as some kind of elevator. As Cal got in, the ball activated and the whole structure started to descend deep into the planet.

The young Padawan looked at his friend, but the little robot was fixed in a trance. "What is it, BD? Another message?"

BD didn't answer, but the voice of Cordova did. "My Friend, I believe this to be the earliest Zeffo site we've uncovered yet. Despite my reservations, I cannot chase the Bogano Vault from my mind. Its visions shaped the direction of an entire culture. I must understand why..."

BD's message ended and he beeped happily.

"Yeah, buddy. We're on the right track".

The elevator stops and the doors open. Cal stepped outside, BD once again on his shoulders. The full magnitude of the tomb was now visible.

It was an enormous building. The walls were erected several meters above the ground and ended in a circular dome. The main entrance was signaled by a bust. The figure was similar to the one Cal had seen sculpted on the mountain. It was a Zeffo.

"I'm in the tomb", Cal called Cere through his comms. It was a good thing they still worked deep inside the mountains. "It's massive".

"And the Empire?"

Cal hadn't seen a stormtrooper or an Imperial structure since the control room. "No sign of them down here".

"What about Cordova?"

"Still not sure what I'm supposed to find. He's a little..."

"Eccentric? Tell me about it... But he wouldn't send us here for his amusement. Keep an open mind".

Cal walked deeper into the tomb. He tried his best to sneak around the several traps that had been laid to stop anyone who was trying to find a way inside the tomb - which was exactly what Cal was trying to do. On his way, he found several wind tunnels. Except... "There's not just wind rippling through these chimes. Voices... from the past?"

The Zeffo might have vanished, but their work still persisted to this day. And from what Cal had seen, they had achieved a level of technological and spiritual marvel. How had they disappeared just like that? Or worse, what had made them disappear?

Cal didn't have time to think about the implications of his questions when he found himself in front of a massive humanoid statue. Once Cal got close enough, the statue revealed itself to be a 'one-of-a-kind' mechanical golem and, through an energy core in its chest, it blasted a beam of pure energy toward the human. Cal was able to evade it, turned on his lightsaber and swung it at the golem.

As Cal tried to find a way to defeat the Tomb Guardian, he realized that most of it was made of solid metal, thus stopping Cal's lightsaber from dealing some meaningful damage. By observing the Guardian's attack pattern, the Padawan attacked it in the joints and places where the armor was more fragile. Whittled down, the Guardian eventually collapsed on the ground.

Behind the place where the Guardian once stood, there was a crack in the wall. Carefully, Cal approached it and touched it, focusing on the Force emanating from that crack. He felt it, the Force pulling him... back to the training room with his Master.

Jaro Tapal was reprimanding his apprentice for not doing a good job. He threw a metal ball at young Cal, who was not able to catch and was hit by it.

"Ah!" Cal cried.

"Focus!" his master said. "The Jedi do not seek aggression, but we stand against it. The Force is there to shield us. The obstacles in your path define the path. What stands in the way becomes the way. Now... try again".

Master Tapal threw another ball. It was another ball which Cal was not able to catch nor dodge. But this time, he didn't say anything. It was his own fault he kept getting hit.

"Again!" his master shouted from his place.

Master Tapal threw yet another metallic ball at Cal and, this time, he was able to use the Force to catch and throw it back toward his master, who caught it effortlessly.

"Good. Continue".

Cal was not able to continue his training session with his late Master as he snapped out of his daydream. He looked again at the cracked wall and focused on it. He closed his eyes. "The obstacles in your path define the path. What stands in the way... becomes the way..."

The Padawan's mind, reached deeper into the Force, feeling his connection with it, change, triggering something he hadn't felt since the Clone Wars. He pulled his hand back and then thrust it forward. A burst of Force power flew from his hand and the wall crumbled in front of him.

Cal opened his eyes and saw a wide room now accessible through the new gap.

I did it, he thought.

Past the doorway, laid the inner sanctum of the Tomb. BD jumped from Cal's shoulder and ran toward the wall right in front of them. Cal followed close. Then, the little droid projected a holographic message.

"My Friend," Master Cordova's voice echoed in the room, "take a look at the detail on this bark! The distinctive striations. It can only be a wroshyr tree from Kashyyyk. It's time to call on an old friend. If the Zeffo had contact with Kashyyyk, there is a good chance Chieftain Tarfful will know about it".

Cal nodded at BD-1. "Alright, we're in the right track. Kashyyyk it is then".

BD beeped cheerfully at the prospect of yet another adventure.

The duo turned around, but the exit was blocked by yet another Tomb Guardian. It emerged from the passage and released a beam in Cal's direction. The human dodged and threw a powerful Force push toward the golem, staggering it. Using the chance to safely get close to it, Cal wasted no time and sent his lightsaber's blade directly into the Guardian's energy core. The Guardian stood still and then fell.

Cal took a few steps back, making sure that the golem was going nowhere near him and left the inner sanctum. Near the elevator, he called Cere.

"What did you find?" she asked.

"The Zeffo went to Kashyyk. Cordova mentioned someone named Tarfful".

"Yes," Cere recognized the name. "A Wookie chieftain. They were old friends".

"Think he's still around?" Cal got inside the elevator and it started to climb up to the surface.

"There's only one way to know. We have to go to Kashyyyk".

Chapter 10

ZEFFO'S RUINS

Cal and BD-1 made his way back to the surface of Zeffo. This time, the elevator stopped directly there. Unfortunately, they weren't alone. Spread across the place, there were several stormtroopers, scout troopers and Imperial Officers. They were seemingly planning a mining operation on the archeological site.

Cal realized he already had what he wanted and, unless any of those troopers were Force-sensitive, they weren't going anywhere near the Temple, especially with some golems still around. Truth was, there was no point in trying to take out all of those stormtroopers. They were too many of them and Cal didn't feel like he was ready for such a challenge. Besides, he had to make sure he went to Kashyyyk as soon as possible before the Imps got there. Bearing that in mind, Cal decided to run away and cut through the operation within the ice caves. Those, indeed, were poorly guarded.

With the help of BD-1's mapping capabilities and his attunement to the Force, Cal was able to navigate the labyrinthine paths of the caves rather easily. It took Cal a few minutes to find anyone, but the Padawan didn't like who he found - a Purge Trooper. He wore the black and red signature armor just like the one accompanying the Inquisitors back on Bracca. As the trooper turned on his electrical batons, Cal's mind went back to the horrendous moment when the Second Sister red lightsaber pierced Prauf's thorax.

Taking him down, now that they were alone with each other, was easier. Cal relied on his new 'found' Force

abilities to disarm and incapacitate the trooper. In the end, Cal's saber ended the trooper's life. He called Cere.

"I just took Cere, I just took down a trooper wearing black and red armor. The same type from Bracca".

"A Purge Trooper. Their only purpose is to hunt down Jedi survivors".

"Are the Inquisitors coming here as well?"

"It's possible, but we're far from Bracca", she said. "They might think Purge Troopers are enough. Or they could be stalling you on purpose. Stay wary".

Anxious to get off the planet, Cal hurried back to the *Mantis*. After he reached the end of the ice caves, he found an imperial elevator. "Hey Cere, I'm under an Imperial dig site. They got a lot further than we thought".

"We can't worry about that now. The Empire's identified you as the Jedi from Bracca. They're searching for the *Mantis* as we speak".

"Can't you move the *Mantis*?"

"It's too risky to start the engine. Its power discharge will draw their attention immediately".

"I'm on an elevator right now... I'll be back as fast as I can".

The elevator took him all the way to the surface outside of the mountainous region. He saw the *Mantis* on the landing pad and he ran toward it. He was almost there when Cere called again.

"I'm right..." he started to say but was interrupted.

"Cal, we've got a walker firing at us, and our weapons are down!"

"Is that him? Tell him he better get his bu..." Greez took over the comms. The transmission was cut as a heavy blaster hit the ship.

"I'm on my way!"

Cal saw the AT-ST walker and ran in its direction. The driver saw him as well, lightsaber in hand and started blasting Cal instead.

That's it, Cal thought. Focus on me...

Cal was small and fast enough to be difficult to hit. Therefore, the pilot fired missiles toward the floor where the Padawan was. Using the Force push, the missiles were sent flying back toward the walker. The At-ST took a few steps back, its pilot disoriented with the impact, giving Cal enough time to run under it and cut its legs off. The walker crashed. Cal walked slowly toward the exit hatch. As he had expected, it opened immediately, the pilot crawling to the ground, grasping for his blaster. That was his intention, because Cal never gave him the chance.

Back inside the *Mantis*, Cal sat down on the copilot's chair to rest his legs for a bit.

Greez looked over to him and gave him a smile. "Nice work out there, kid. Hey, you got some real moves on ya. Ha! Just tell me that this visit wasn't for nothing".

Cal was definitely pleased with himself. "I found the tomb of a Zeffo sage. They were definitely Force-sensitive".

"An advanced civilization of Force wielders who mysteriously vanished...no wonder Master Cordova became so obsessed with them. What else did you find?" Cere asked.

"Before they disappeared, the Zeffo journeyed to the planet Kashyyyk".

"Ohhh..."

"Cordova had a Wookiee friend named Tarfful. Maybe we can find him?"

"Kashyyyk, I... look, things are really bad down there", Greez explained. "The Empire's muscling in on those Wookiees big time".

"Then we better get ready for a fight", Cal said.

Part Four: Kashyyyk

Chapter 11

ABOARD THE *MANTIS*

Cal left the bridge to make himself a drink in the back of the *Mantis*. Running, jumping and fighting, had made him thirsty.

Cere followed him. "I think this lifestyle suits you. Fighting that walker seems to have made you more confident. So... how are you holding up?"

"With the Force?"

"Yes, with the Force. I know you said it could feel... overwhelming".

Cal smirked after taking a long sip of water. "Yeah... But on the bright side, I haven't gotten killed myself yet", he turned her back on her while filling his cup again. "Rather not talk about it".

"Yeah, well, I understand", Cere sat on the cushions. "More than you realize".

Cal felt a bit guilty for not wanting to share. He joined Cere. "W... Why'd you choose to stop using the Force?"

Cere didn't answer right away, as if recollecting the events that led her to that decision. "When the Purge started, and our..." Cere paused and Cal didn't need to reach out with the Force to feel Cere's grief. He felt it too. "Clone Troopers turned against us, my Padawan and I took several younglings and went into hiding. But... we didn't last long. An imperial patrol was about to discover our location, so, I tried to lure them away from my Padawan, Trilla. She stayed behind with the younglings. But they caught me.

"They... they tortured me". Cal, who had been staring intently at Cere, looked away at the thought of seeing her being tortured. They wanted to know about the others

and... how many were left, but mostly they wanted to know about Cordova. And where he went".

"But you escaped", Cal said, with a small touch of hope lingering in his voice.

"Yeah. It was a prison riot. I saw my opportunity and I took it". Another pause. "But they almost broke me. And I am not the same as I was, Cal".

"Your Padawan..." Cal said softly. "Did she survive?"

Cere paused before saying what Cal feared. "No". Cere got up. "But that's why we can't give up. We can't let the sacrifice of those closest to us... be for nothing". She stepped away and walked to the back of the ship, leaving Cal alone with Greez to collect her thoughts.

Cal walked to the bridge. "Are you okay?" he asked the Lacero.

"Yeah... I'm great", he said, leaning on his pilot's chair, eyes closed and his two pair of hands resting on his chest. "Just enjoying some peace and quiet".

"Fine by me. Just... what's the ETA, again?"

Greez didn't bother opening his eyes. "Soon. Just sit down and relax, will ya?"

*

"Whoa", Cal said. What they found waiting for them on Kashyyyk was everything but a reason to relax. "Tell me we're not running that blockade".

Indeed, the planet of Kashyyyk was under a heavy lockdown. That was easily given away by the terrifying number of Imperial Star Destroyers that were in orbit, a few kilometers outside of the hyperspace lane.

"Only as a last resort. I've rigged the *Mantis*' transponder to emit Imperial signals. Hey, Greez?"

"Yeah?"

Cere touched the panels and switches on her console. "Keep your power low and act like we belong".

“Just like Bracca”, the Latero said as he kept the *Mantis* steady through the blockade. “No sweat”.

Cal reached up to modulate the ship’s power signature, but Greez slapped him away. He showed the Padawan his four hands. “Do I need another set of hands? Hmm?”

“No?”

“Exactly. Now, keep your eyes on the scanner”.

“Alright, alright”, a resigned Cal said.

The *Mantis* slowly closed in on the planet below. More and more Star Destroyers were getting behind them, as Greez flew them nearby the giant ships.

“I don’t see anything”, Cal stated.

Cere, on the other hand, seemed to have picked up something on the comms. “They’re preoccupied with something on the ground... we’re clear”.

The *Mantis* flew down into the atmosphere. Even on the surface, the planet was crawling with a heavy imperial presence. It was also visible that the Empire had built several landing points, all controlled by groups of armed troopers. Cal and Greez began to scan for a more discrete landing point.

As they fly, steady and at stable altitude, they come across huge columns of smoke, coming from the ancient Kashyyykian trees - the wroshyr - that had been cut away.

“That doesn’t look good”, Cal said.

“The Empire is devouring Kashyyyk for its natural resources. Wookiees have been enslaved, or... *displaced*”.

Greez was heading the *Mantis* toward an enormous tree visible above the smoke, surrounded by massive mountains.

Before they can begin to land, however, a TIE Fighter swoops past them. And it wasn’t alone, as a ship was pursuing the TIE and firing at it. The TIE exploded in a ball of flames.

“That was a close one, kid! Aren’t you supposed to be watching the monitors?” Greez asked.

“Guerrilla fighters! Wookiees and off-worlders ambushing an Imperial convoy”.

“Walkers approaching their position”, Cere added.

“Tarrful could be with them”, Cal said.

“Tarrful could be anywhere! Like deep in the ground, like we’re gonna be if we get caught in that battle down there!”

“We don’t have any other options, and... and they’ll die without our help”, Cal insisted. If the Wookiees were fighting against the Empire, they had to help.

“So what’s your plan?” Cere asked.

Cal shrugged and unstrapped himself from his seat. “Sabotage”, Cal thought for a while about what he had just said. “We used to scrap walkers on Bracca. I’ll just jack one”. *Easy right? Maybe not...*, he thought as he made his way to the main room of the ship.

Greez laughed. “Ha! Get a load of the kid. He thinks we’re back in the Clone Wars!”

Cere, however, didn’t laugh.

“Captain... get us near those walkers”.

“Wait, what?” the Latero looked back at Cere. “You serious?”

Cere ignored the pilot and focused on Cal. “Listen. Those walkers double as troop transports so once you get inside... Be careful”.

Cal opened the door as BD-1 climbed to his shoulder. The sound of the fighting down below was even louder now.

“Time for *No Freeze Greez* to work his magic”, the Latero said as he closed the ship on a lake.

“Hey,” Cere said. “Do me a favor. Stay alive down there?”

Cal smiled. “I’ll add it to the plan”. He walked out onto the ramp. The wind was strong and threatened to take him out of the ship itself. Good thing that was already his plan.

“Alright, if you’re jumping you better do it now, kid!” Greez shouted from the cockpit.

“You ready for a swim, BD?”

“Beep boo-beep!” the droid beeped excitedly.

Cal leapt off the ship. “Woo-hoo!”

The Padawan neared terminal speed and he braced for the impact as the waters of the famous forest planet rose to meet him.

Chapter 12

KASHYYYKIAN LAKE

The water was warm, fortunately. Unfortunately, Cal wasn't there to take a good bath - even though he needed one. BD is the first to bob its head out of the water and is followed immediately by Cal. He looks around and sees, right in front of him, three AT-ATs. One of them was covered in algae. Cal swam toward that one.

As they approached the walker, a rebel LAAT destroyed a TIE fighter that ended up colliding with the algae-covered walker. Some of the debris almost hit Cal and BD-1.

That was close, he thought.

Cal swam to the left front feet of the AT-AT and grabbed the vines, using them to climb up. Once he had reached the top of that leg, he jumped onto another and climbed around the walker. Cal was able to rise all the way to the top of the AT-AT in time to see one stormtrooper, who had stuck his head out, being hit by a direct shot from a rebel ship, leaving the entrance hatch open.

Just my luck, he thought and he swung down the tube. Hiding in the shadows, Cal could see three troopers gathered around the corpses of their colleagues. They were speaking to each other. "There's no pulse. Your turn to report fatalities".

Another trooper sighed. "This is L9-720 reporting in. We've got confirmed casualties".

Just as the trooper was about to continue his reports, the third spotted Cal. "It's the Jedi!"

Cal turned on his blue blade and waited for the troopers to make the first move. They were armed with electric batons that they could use to parry Cal's lightsaber. The first tried to hit Cal too soon, leaving himself open. Cal dodged his

attack and used his opening to penetrate the soldier's thorax. He could bet that he had heard one of the other stormtroopers gulp in dry.

While the second trooper committed the same mistake, the third, however, was more cautious. Never leaving an opening, he attacked Cal several times. Every time, Cal could only block.

"You're going to join the other Jedi soon enough".

Cal didn't think so. Using the Force push, he threw the trooper at the wall. He was pretty sure that the man was more than unconscious. The young Padawan moved toward the pilots' compartment, who were so drawn in the fight that didn't they hear Cal approaching them.

"They brought more firepower than we thought. How's our hull looking?" the pilot asked.

The co-pilot checked the data on his console. "Badly damaged. We're at 70% integrity and falling".

"That should still be enough to stomp out these insurgents. Keep her steady!"

Cal turned to his little friend and pointed at the console. BD-1 looked at the pilots and nodded, understanding what he had to do. He hopped onto the dashboard. The stormtroopers looked at him, confused, and Cal smashed their helmets together. The two pilots toppled to the ground, out cold.

"Can't believe that worked", Cal said, occupying the seat of the pilot. Now, he had to find out how to pilot the giant vehicle.

A hologram of a stormtrooper popped up on the dashboard. "Report! What's happening over there? You're in violation of Imperial protocol Z-207. Stand down or we won't hesi..."

"Can you shut that guy up?" Cal asked the droid.

BD obliged and destroyed the holo-transmitter. "Be-beep?"

"Better", Cal smiled. "Let's do this". Slowly, the walker was turned toward another one and Cal unleashed a salvo of

blasters and missiles. The pilots didn't stand a chance at the surprise attack, especially coming from one of their own.

The Padawan and the droid march forward into the canyon, to where the battle itself was located. They used their element of surprise to attack other imperial vehicles, outposts and garrisons. The odds were getting better and better for the insurgency.

Cal thought that one day this might become known as the 'Cal maneuver'. Not that he was planning to hijack another AT-AT any time soon. His thoughts were interrupted by a man wearing a green body armor landing on their windshield. He was definitely not an imperial. He knocked on the glass.

"Hey! Who are you?" he asked.

"Someone who just brought an AT-AT to the table. Who are *you*?"

"Someone making the Empire angry. We're advancing on an Imp landing pad up ahead, wouldn't mind fire support".

"Copy that", Cal answered after destroying a bridge full of stormtroopers. The man jumped off the AT-AT out of Cal's vision. Soon, the walker had reached the landing pad. "Let's make 'em even angrier", Cal pushed the trigger on his controls and unleashed a new salvo on the ships and personnel on the landing pad, including imperial fighters and a transport ship that had just taken itself into the air. As Cal destroyed the ship, its wreckage flew directly at Cal.

"Hold on! Brace yourself BD!" the young human shouted at his friend. The walker was hit and lost its control, losing its balance and finally crumpled into the ground.

Realizing that he was alright, Cal looked at the droid. "Hey, you okay?"

BD beeped positively "Beep boop?" he then asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay too".

"Trill! Beep boop beep?"

Cal smiled as he opened the front top hatch and jumped outside. "No, we're *not* doing that again".

The armored man from earlier approached them, confused. "You just wrecked a perfectly good walker. Got a name?"

"Cal. Cal Kestis".

"Saw Gerrera". They shook hands. "What are you doing on Kashyyyk?"

"Looking for somebody. What are you doing here?" Cal asked, trying to keep up with the other man's pace.

"My companions and I came to Kashyyyk to disrupt Imperial supply lines".

Overhead, the *Mantis* touched down on the landing pad. "Hey!" Cal waved at them to show that he had survived that madness. He and Saw began walking toward it.

"So, who are you looking for?" Saw asked.

"A Wookiee Chieftain named Tarfful".

Saw smiles. "Tarfful is impossible to find. There's a reason he's evaded the Empire this long".

"He's a freedom fighter?" Cal enquired.

"He's *the* freedom fighter. A symbol of the Wookiee resistance, striking at the Empire from the Shadowlands".

Meanwhile, Cere and Greez left the *Mantis* to meet with Cal. "Cere, Greez. This is Saw".

"How ya doin?" Greez asked.

Saw, however, was not interested in making new acquaintances. "What do you want with Tarfful?"

"Jedi business".

"The Jedi are dead", Saw said immediately, hands on his hips. He had known the Jedi. He had fought alongside some of them during the Clone Wars. If there *were* Jedi alive, he would have heard something.

"Not all of them", Cere says with a smile on her face. As if to prove her point, Cal extended his lightsaber hilt.

"You get that off a corpse?" Saw asked Cal.

"My master gave it to me", he said. BD-1 beeped sadly.

Saw decided to ignore the subject for now. "This pad supports an Imperial refinery that runs on Wookiee slave

labor. Intel suggests that some of the captives there are guerrilla fighters”.

“I should help them. One of them might know how to contact Tarfful”.

“It’s possible”.

Greez held his four hands in front of him, palms open. “Whoaa, wait a minute, hold on, wait a minute. The Mantis works wonders, I mean it’s a great ship, excellent pilot” he smiled on his own compliment “but it is not built for close support”.

Cere agreed. “We’ll stay here and monitor Imperial transmissions. With a bit of luck, we’ll intercept any distress call”.

“Appreciate it” any help was valuable against the Empire. “My lieutenants and I will scout ahead to prepare the attack. Join us when you’re ready”. He turned around and joined his troops. “Go, go!”

Cal remained with Greez and Cere.

“Glad you’re alright”.

“Yeah, yeah, good to see you too. This place is a dump”, Greez pointed out.

“Your plan worked”, Cere said. “And now you want to follow Saw?”

“What do you think of Saw’s plan?” he asked.

“He’s fighting a losing battle. I doubt freedom for the Wookiees is his only goal”.

“He seems trustworthy”.

“He might prove to be”, Cere was cautious about the guerrilla fighter. “But there’s more going on here than we know”.

“And don’t forget the Empire fights dirty. Watch your tail in that refinery, kid”, Greez warned the young Padawan.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind”.

Shortly after, Cal regrouped with Saw’s men – a band of insurgents he soon learned called themselves ‘Partisans’. They were mapping out their plan of attack.

Cal continued onward, toward the Imperial prison compound. On the way, he found a spider-like wyyyschokk. Even though he was able to cut through the animal, Cal hoped that it was the largest native of Kashyyyk, besides the Wookiees, that he would have to deal with, even though he knew from stories that there might be always something bigger. Soon, he spotted the band of prison-breaking Partisans and their leader, Saw.

Chapter 13

IMPERIAL PRISON

The Partisans and Saw were crouched near a railed ledge. When Cal approached the group, Saw handed Cal a pair of electro-binoculars. "Imperial sap refinery lies dead ahead".

"What does the Empire want with tree sap?" Cal straightened himself a bit to look over the rails.

"Nothing good. They refine the sap into a powerful compound and they're rushing to expand production".

The young Padawan looked through the binoculars and saw a large squadron of stormtroopers on the base of the refinery. Among them, there were several Wookiee slaves, chained on the wrists, legs and neck. One of the Wookiees roared something but the stormtrooper slammed the butt of his blaster against the Wookiee's head, sending him sprawling on the floor. Cal couldn't stand and watch anymore. He had to do something about it.

"We have to stop them".

"That's the plan. We don't know their endgame but we know they've spread themselves too thin. This map we've recovered proves it". Saw handed Cal a small chip.

"Here you go, bud". Cal uploaded the map into BD-1 and the droid was able to project a holo-map of the refinery and the territory surrounding it.

"These refineries double as brutal prison camps. We'll use those cutters to create a distraction while you take your lightsaber and free the Wookiees inside", Saw said while gesturing at the map. "We'll need their help to stop the Empire".

"Understood", Cal and BD nodded.

Saw stood up and fired a grappling gun toward a nearby structure, preparing to storm the front of the camp. "Watch

yourself in there". He and the rest of his partisans departed, leaving Cal and BD-1 alone.

"You hear that? He said he needs my help".

BD didn't like the sound of that.

"Sorry. *Our* help".

"Trill-beep!" the little droid beeped happily.

"C'mon buddy".

Cal and BD-1 climbed up and around the metal platform they were standing in. After entering and exiting a small, collapsed mine, they stopped to look at the refinery. It was huge, with two tall towers built around brown chimneys. The smoke it was letting go into the atmosphere was black as coal. Cal had to hide behind a tree as he heard two TIE fighters approaching. Once they were gone, he resumed his approach to the refinery. A group of stormtroopers were standing outside as Saw's men reached the first cutter and turned it on. Cal was close enough to hear them.

"Over there!" one of them shouted. "One of the cutters turned on".

"Are they running some kind of drill?"

"Maybe. Think we should call it in?"

A third one chimed in. "That'd be a breach of protocol. If there's a disturbance, their squad should call it in".

The others agreed. "Yeah, better do this by the book".

Cal used a loose vine and swung himself to the middle of a small squadron and ignited his lightsaber to block the incoming laser blasts. Cutting through stormtrooper armor was easy and after dealing with all the stormtroopers he looked at what he had done. He knew that they wouldn't hesitate in killing him if they had the chance - they always shot first. But he still regretted doing it. The image of the chained Wookiees came across his mind and Cal knew he had time to reflect later. Now, he had to save the Wookiees.

Once inside the refinery, Cal met minimal resistance.

"Attention all units. We've lost contact with our troops stationed at Cargo Pad 119-Grek". Cal smiled. The partisans

were doing their work and the distraction was working. Nevertheless, he had to hurry up. That's when he heard two cries of pain. Cal opened a door at the end of the corridor he was in and saw two partisans engaging a Purge Trooper. The electro-staff wielding warrior defeated them all too easily. No surprise there... They were trained to kill Jedi. Two partisans was merely a bit of fun for the trooper.

The trooper looked at Cal, standing at the door, and recognized him instantly. "A Jedi. This is what I've trained for". He lunged forward.

Cal turned his lightsaber on just in time to parry the attack, but the impact of his electro-staff striking the blade sent Cal reeling back.

"Feeling the pressure?" the trooper laughed after another attack, which Cal barely managed to dodge. "Filthy traitor! You will fall before me".

Cal wasn't planning on it. The trooper was more versed on melee combat than Cal was, obviously. He had to keep him at a distance. Cal reached out to the Force and sent his adversary flying back.

Cal jumped and caught the soldier by surprise. When the trooper lifted his staff to parry the attack, Cal sliced the staff in two, deactivating it. Cal could imagine the expression of shock behind the mask. Quickly, Cal drove his lightsaber through the Purge Trooper. "You won't be killing any Jedi any time soon". Cal turned his weapon off and the man slid to the ground.

Cal continued through the refinery. Resistance was stiff, and he encountered only a handful of stormtroopers. The real problem was when he saw himself in front of an errant wyyyschock that clambered through the new openings in the refinery's walls. Cal took the lightsaber from his belt and held it in his hand as the spider walked toward him. *No*, he thought, closing his eyes.

Cal extended his hand in front of him and reached out to the Force. He could still feel his 'shattered' connection. But

the flickering light inside him was flickering less. It was more steady and... brighter. He smiled as he saw the spider in front of him. His eyes were closed and he couldn't see the scary legs and the scary eyes. He only noticed the spark of life within it. The spider was scared, just like he was. Yes, he *was* scared. More than he had ever been. Running around with a lightsaber in his hand made things feel a little better but he couldn't deny the fact that the fear that he had bottled up since the Purge was still there. And somehow, he could connect with the wyyyschock in a way... wait.

Cal opened his eyes and saw the spider climbing the mound and disappearing from his view. *Well, that worked*, he smiled.

"Still alive in there?" The comms sparkled to life with Cere's voice.

"So far. Almost to the prison".

"Good. Imperial distress calls are going out across the planet. If you don't get the prisoners soon..."

"We can do this. I promise".

It took Cal another ten minutes of running through the labyrinthine facility to find the Wookiees' cellblock.

One of them growled angrily at Cal.

"Hey. We're here to free you. You're not alone".

Cal looked at the computer terminal just beside the cell, trying to find a way to open it. Behind him, a blast door opened, and a massive KX-series imperial security droid strode out and picked Cal up by the cuff of his neck.

"Visitation is not permitted". The droid threw Cal away from the terminal, and he tumbled across the hard metal floor. He rose to his feet and drew his lightsaber.

"Hostile spotted", the droid said.

It charged toward Cal, knocking his best attempt at a block away, and punched the human in the face.

"You cannot escape".

Cal tasted blood in his mouth. *Great*. The Padawan got up again and kept his distance from the droid. He needed a

plan.

The droid kept walking toward the intruder. Above it, there were several cables. Cal reached out to Force and broke the supports. The cables fell down, almost reaching the floor. Cal used the Force to lift the two ends of the cable and threw them at the droid. It stopped, hundreds of volts coursing through its body. After a few seconds, the droid fell on the floor and crumbled to the ground, smoke leaving the metal shell.

Cal returned to the task at hand. After a moment of fidgeting with the Imperial terminal, he was able to open the cell doors. At least a dozen Wookiees clambered out, roaring gratefully. One of them even wrapped Cal in a tight, furry hug.

“Glad to help”, Cal laughed.

Some of the Wookiees pried open the main door to the prison area. A group of Partisans were waiting for them on the other side, led by the woman who helped map the entire operation: Mari Kosan.

“Who’s ready to fight some Imps?” she shouted.

The wookiees roared back, hands in the air.

“Alright, let’s help these Wookiees get back in the fight”. She turned to Cal “Great work, Jedi”.

Cal nodded at her while the Wookiees, and most of the Partisans, moved out of the area.

Cal walked higher up across the ridge. Now that the Wookiees were free, he had to get to the Shadowlands. Hopefully, he would find Chieftain Tarrful there. BD-1 began mapping out the path forward. The forests of Kashyyyk were vast.

“That’s the path to the Shadowlands? There has to be a way across, right?”

“Boo boop”.

“You’re right, we can’t search the whole forest. Better get back to Saw”.

Cal turned back, and followed Mari. They made their way through the refinery. Finally, they met with Saw, who was leading a group of Partisans through an as-of-yet unconquered section of the refinery.

"To the prisons! We need the Wookiees to finish this. Hurry!" he shouted.

"They've got reinforcements and the door's jammed!" one of the Partisans shouted.

"It won't budge! We're trapped"

Cal passed through them and drew a circle with his lightsaber on the door. Now, they had a way out.

"You've done it!" Cal shouted. "Get to the roof!"

Cal nodded and made his way up to the roof. There were more Imperial troopers and droids waiting for him, but the Force was on his side. He was a one-man army – they didn't stand a chance. But, just as the roof was beginning to clear, an AT-ST lumbered out of the forest and onto the platform.

"Jedi!" Saw called him. "We don't have the firepower to breach its hull!"

"We're on it". Before the pilot on the walker noticed Cal, he was already slicing his lightsaber through its legs. The AT-ST toppled almost immediately. The last hopes of the Empire holding the refinery were fading by the second.

Battered Partisans and Wookiees came out of cover to meet him, cheering enthusiastically. Somehow, BD-1 looked even more proud than Cal.

The crowd quieted when Saw climbed a crate. "These have been hard years. We've lost comrades, friends, family, to the Empire. Dark times. And yet the fire still burns. Hope... still burns. The Jedi are not yet lost. We are not yet lost. Kashyyyk is not. For the cause!"

The cheers erupted again, with the Partisans dutifully striking their fists against their left breast at Saw's final declaration. Saw, satisfied that he had done his duty as a leader, approached Cal.

"You've seen what the Empire has done to Kashyyyk. These stories are playing out all over the galaxy. My Partisans could use a Jedi on our side".

"I'm honored, but... we have our own mission I can't walk away from. Not yet".

"The offer stands", Saw said, resting his hand on Cal's shoulder. "Keep it in mind". Saw walked away, clearly disappointed but grateful nonetheless. A Wookiee and the Partisan from earlier, Mari Kosan, approached Cal.

"Cal, this is Commander Choyssyk".

Cal recognized the Wookiee who had hugged him earlier.

The Wookiee roared softly at Cal.

"Uh... sorry, I'm not quite fluent".

Mari translated for him. "Choyssyk says he'll do whatever he can to find Tarrful and vouch for you".

"Do you think he's still alive?"

"Have faith, Cal", Mari said.

"You know Tarfful?" Cal asked the Wookiee.

The Wookiee roared in reply. "He was part of Tarfful's crew", Mari said. "Got captured on a mission. Tarfful couldn't risk more warriors to save him. He spent months in that refinery. Choyssyk will help you find Tarfful, but they're always on the move. Could take some time".

"That's all I can ask, thank you".

Mari nodded "For the cause".

As Cal moved to leave, Saw beckoned him over.

"We did it", Cal said.

"By the skin of our teeth. It'll be harder without your help".

"I know. But I can't abandon my mission".

"I understand. I've got Intel that may help you. A few rotations ago, my people searched an abandoned Wookiee village nearby. No sign of Tarfful, but we did find out the safest route to the Shadowlands is through this refinery".

Cal thought about it. "A built-in escape plan if this didn't work out".

"You catch on fast. When you're ready to find Tarfful, that's the way to go".

Cal nodded, and thought for a moment.

"You've been fighting for so long. Have you learned anything from war?"

"Nothing unites people like tragedy. Everything the Empire takes from us only makes us stronger. Each injustice spurs others to join our cause. I've been fighting my whole life, even before the Empire. I fought alongside Jedi like you. One thing I know is that if we stand together, we can win".

Cal smiled. "Just like today. Thank you".

The way back to the *Mantis*, was easier now that he knew the way back. When he saw Cere and Greez, however, they didn't have good news for him.

"Cal, good to see you back in one piece. Mari Kosan contacted us. We know you couldn't find Tarfful", Cere said.

"I love risking our lives for nothing. It's fantastic", Greez was still ironic as ever.

"It wasn't for nothing. Mari and Choyssyk will come through".

"I like your optimism. We could all use a little of that now and then", Cere smiled.

"Hey, I'm a positive guy, too", Greez crossed his arms. "I'm positive that if I die, I'll be very upset".

"You did good, Cal. We might not have found Tarfful yet, but you saved lives today. Don't forget that. By the way, I've been monitoring Imperial communications and I picked up something. Project Auger has been reactivated. The Empire might have found a Zeffo tomb. We can't waste any time".

"Looks like we still have work to do", Cal said.

"Back to Zeffo, huh? Pity. Heard about a high stakes game from one of Saw's fighters. A few extra credits couldn't hurt, y'know?"

"Gambling?" Cere's face changed completely. "Greez, use your head. One of these days, the Haxion Brood is going to

catch up with you”.

They entered the ship and Greez sat on the pilot’s chair. “Those slubs? I’ll hear ‘em coming from a parsec away!” The *Mantis* began to climb out of the atmosphere.

“I don’t need your gambling habit causing us more trouble with murderous crime syndicates”.

“You’re right, you’re right, I know. I just wanna blow off some stress every once in a while, y’know? Anyway, all of that is in the past, I’m sure it won’t be a problem”.

Cal smiled as the *Mantis* made the jump to hyperspace. He was pretty sure that ‘murderous crime syndicates’ sounded exactly like Greez’s definition of a problem.

Part Five: Return to Zeffo

Chapter 14

LANDING PAD

The landing on Zeffo's surface was no easier than the first time. Greez decided to land the *Mantis* in the last place anyone expected - the same place where they had landed the first time. The wreckage of the AT-ST that Cal took down was still in the hangar, but the corpse of the dead pilot had been taken away already.

Cere accompanied Cal and BD on their way out. "These ancient tombs didn't survive all this time because they were easy to find", Cere called from behind.

"It's a challenge I'm willing to take".

"I can see that", she smiled. "I'm glad you believe in what we are trying to accomplish".

Cal nodded. "I always have. Ever since I was a youngling, I trusted the Force. Those names on the list... they're a test. And I believe I will succeed. I just needed someone to remind me".

"I like your confidence. A journey like this one can challenge you in ways you've never been before..."

"I understand. I think I'm ready".

I think so too, Cere thought. "We got your back, Cal".

Cal smiled and nodded as Cere got back inside the ship. "Well, BD, it's time for us to go".

BD beeped happily.

The fastest way to the Zeffo tombs was directly through the ice caves. Unlike the first time, the caves were now filled with stormtroopers. Even though they weren't a problem for Cal, it made him worry about the progress of their exploration of the tombs. Had they found them yet?

"They've really stepped it up", he mutters under his breath. He then calls Cere. "They increased security here.

Are you two safe?"

"You worry about the mission. I'll worry about keeping us off the radar. We'll be fine".

"Got it".

From there to the settlement and then to the Imperial base was easy, especially with the help of BD's holo maps.

"Wasn't expecting this", he says to BD after realizing that the Imperial had made great progress since the last time. At least, they hadn't accessed the tombs yet. It doesn't take long for the two of them to arrive at a crash site of a *Venator Star Destroyer*. The debris from the Clone Wars made his mind rewind to Bracca and Prauf.

BD realized that Cal's face was showing the weight of the sadness he felt. He beeped.

"Yeah, BD. Memories are complicated..."

"Beep-bee boo-boop".

"You're right, but we have work to do" Cal took another look at the ship. He was amazed by how big it was. At first, Cal thought it was weird that there were no Imps in the area, but a closer look at the wreckage told him why. There were several enormous jotaz lumbering around. Cal tried his best not to attract attention to himself by entering in an underground tunnel. As he made his way in, he quickly found himself wading through water mixed with the Venator's fuel runoff. He sensed a Force echo.

"This tunnel flooded suddenly. What could have caused such a thing?" he said to himself. "Something smells like old oil", he said.

BD was offended.

"Sorry, buddy", Cal explained himself, "not you. The water".

Cal swam out of the flooded tunnel and got inside an elevator that BD helped slice.

"I'm sure we're getting close".

"Boo? Bee boo trill?"

"I noticed it earlier, this feeling in the pit of my stomach. At first I thought it was Greez's cooking".

"Bee!"

"Now it's getting even stronger. I think the closer we are, the worse I feel". It wasn't only discomfort. Something like goosebumps. A cold feeling, even in the sunlight.

"Boo be-boop bee?"

"It can't mean anything good".

The farther he goes, the more troops he finds. Two squads, three security droids, two purge troopers and two healing stims later, Cal manages to find yet another elevator. *Surely this will lead me to the tomb, right?* He thought. But, as they descended more and more, Cal felt even colder. The feeling in his stomach got worse and he finally was able to recognize the feeling - from Bracca.

Before Cal could turn on his lightsaber, the doors opened and he was faced by a familiar dark figure.

"Cal Kestis", the Second Sister said.

Chapter 15

IMPERIAL EXCAVATION SITE

“Cal Kestis”, the Second Sister said. “How predictable. Oh, yes, I know your name. Your past. And most importantly... about Cordova. Tell me, where did he hide the holocron?”

Cal gave her his answer by turning his lightsaber on.

“Outstanding”, she said as she ignited her own red blade and faced the Padawan.

Cal charged against her and quickly realized his mistake. She turned on her heels, dodging Cal’s saber and dug her elbow in his stomach. Cal coughed at the blow and took a few steps backwards to catch his breath.

“Amateur”, she said. Cal looked at her and realized that this was just like Bracca. She was just going to toy with him until he was exhausted so that she could finally kill him. And now, neither Cere nor Greez were going to help him get out of this one. The inquisitor jumped and threw her blade at Cal, but he was able to dodge and use the Force to push her aside. She flew against a wall, but got up quickly. “You’ve been training. Perhaps I should take you more seriously, uh?”

Cal charged again, but now with more control and with the help of the Force. They locked blades. “So slow”, she said. They exchanged blows, parrying each other’s strikes, but it was clear that Cal would lose, no matter how much he tried. Finally, Cal jumped, willing the Force to guide his blade. However, the Second Sister dodged quickly and reached out and grabbed him with the Force.

Cal tried to grasp for air, but it was hard. She lifted his body slowly in the air and then tossed him backward. He crashed through the debris littered on the floor. He

struggled to rise, but he couldn't. His whole body was hurting.

Meanwhile, the Inquisitor strode forward, her intent on killing him unmistakable even through the mask she was wearing. She lifted his lightsaber and Cal closed his eyes. And then... nothing. There was just a long silence, except for a buzzing sound. Cal opened his eyes and after noticing that he was still alive, he realized that there was a red energy shield between him and the Second Sister. He looked at BD who had sliced the controls and had activated the shield at the right moment.

She turned off her lightsaber. "You're learning. Not quite as gifted as Cere's last apprentice, but not bad", she said, pacing back and forth behind the ray shield. Her voice was calm, but Cal could still feel the ripples of her connection to the dark side in the Force. It was still cold.

"You've been keeping count", he said.

"I'm surprised she didn't tell you. Cere was never good at keeping secrets".

"And you knew her so well, uh?" Cal joked, knowing that he was only doing that because of the shield between them. He picked up his lightsaber that had fortunately ended up on his side of the barrier.

The Inquisitor laughed. "She was weak. Cracked in an Imperial torture chair. Surrendered the location of her naïve Padawan. They would never have found me..." Cal's smile faltered. Did she just refer to herself? His question was answered as she took off her helmet. "... If it wasn't for her. She betrayed me".

Cal, in disbelief, stepped toward the ray shield. The Second Sister's face. Human. Twisted by the dark side, yes, but still human. "You're Trilla".

"In the flesh".

"I won't let you manipulate me", Cal turned away from her.

"So sure, are you? When faced with the choice to protect herself or her Padawan, she chose self-interest. She'll sell

you out too”.

“Well, I can handle myself”.

“Can you? Can you afford to take that chance? Your new master harbors great darkness. The look on her face when she saw what they had done to me. As I am now. She turned. Exposing her true nature. She used... the dark side”.

“She cut herself off from the Force”.

“Oh? How long before she cracks and betrays you too? Is that who you want beside you when you find the holocron? What would Jaro Tapal say?” she smiled at him.

Cal stepped angrily at her, now hoping, for a fleeting moment, that the shield wasn’t between them. “You have no right to mention his name!”

“I wonder... what would he think if he could see his Padawan now? Skulking in the shadows with a betrayer. Granting her access to a legion of impressionable students”.

Cal could feel the rage building inside him. “No. I won’t let anyone touch them”.

“I thought the same thing once”, Trilla said, picking up her helmet and walking away.

The encounter had left Cal shaken. He used a few moments to let the Force wash over him, to take all that rage away from him, for that was not the path of a Jedi. But he didn’t have too long. He still had to reach the tomb.

“Thanks BD. You saved my life”.

“Beep-boo-boop”.

“And got us closer to the tomb”.

Luckily, Trilla was blocked off from the rest of the excavation, while her Force push put Cal on the side closest to it.

Soon, they had reached the tomb. Unlike the first, this one had an eerie, almost mausoleum aesthetic.

“We found it”, Cal said to the little droid. “It feels... different from the other tomb”.

“Bee boop?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t like it”.

Chapter 16

TOMB OF MIKTRULL

Cal's steps echoed around the tomb. They were the best thing for the Padawan to focus on. It helped draw the rest away. Cere, the Second... uh, Trilla...

He decided to call Cere. "I found it, but... Cere, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because she's a liar", a familiar voice said - Trilla.

"You? How?"

"I rerouted communication the moment you tried to contact her. Slicing encryptions was always a pastime of hers. She taught me once. There's no technique Cere has that I haven't perfected".

Cal shut his comms off and kept going. Trilla was only a few steps behind him, which meant he had to hurry her and her Purge Troopers found their way in. Inside the tomb, Cal and BD find another Tomb Guardian. Even though he was shaken by the revelation from Trilla's relation with Cere, he knew he had to find a way to stab the energy core of the guardians. The golem fell right after that. Cal turned his lightsaber off and entered inside the labyrinthine tomb, where he found a series of strange, floating devices.

Cal was lost in thought when BD projected a familiar face right beside him.

"My Friend," Master Cordova said in his kind and soothing voice, "these devices appear to simulate the planet's gravitational pull. I can't help but see it as a motif".

Cal thought about what it meant but was interrupted by another person. "You're running out of time", Trilla said over the comms.

"For what?"

My scouts located an artifact of interest at the rear of this tomb. Even now I'm studying it, learning his secrets. It seems Cordova was rather taken with these Zeffo. Perhaps enough to hide the holocron amongst their bones".

"Yeah, we'll see how much you learn". Cal entered a new chamber. This one was crawling with stormtroopers. Cal sighed, turned on his lightsaber and rushed off to slice every single one of them, using both his blade and his Force abilities.

"More of my soldiers breach this tomb every minute", Trilla said.

"Afraid to face me yourself?"

Trilla laughed. "Had your droid not intervened, I would've killed you".

"Bee-trill!"

"It's okay buddy, just ignore her".

"Imagine the artifacts the Empire would've missed if it wasn't for your intervention on this backwater planet".

"Sure it's worth the cost? I heard Project Auger came at a high price", Cal said, trying to shut her up.

"Stormtroopers and workers. Expendable resources".

The more he heard her, the more Cal managed to be disgusted by her. "You're a monster".

"I am what Cere made me".

"You say that to make yourself sleep at night. You had a choice. So did Cere. She made the wrong one. That doesn't mean you had to".

"Maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that she betrayed me".

"And that doesn't change the fact that you keep hunting down innocent Jedi".

"Well, what matters now is that I've taken the artifact back to my ship for analysis. Pity you couldn't make it in time".

"Doesn't matter what you steal", Cal snapped at her. "You'll never understand it".

"Yet you do?" Trilla laughed again.

“You’ll find out soon enough”.

The following chamber consisted of massive, elevated platforms. In an all-too-familiar routine by now, Cal began scaling them. He wondered what helped him more: his Jedi training, or his time as a scrapper on Bracca.

“I’ve noticed something while examining this sarcophagus. It’s a very convenient location to dispose of nuisances”.

“You lured me here. Was this your plan all along?”

“You truly have the wits of a scrapper”, a smile on her voice.

Suddenly, an Imperial LAAT patrol gunship descended into the crypt. Cal took quick stock of his situation: he was on a poorly supported platform, suspended in the air above a seemingly bottomless crypt. The gunship released a barrage of fire. However, they had learned their lesson. Instead of firing at Cal, they fired at the support beams holding up the platform. It shuddered, then fell.

Cal tumbled off, watching his lightsaber fall. It was out of reach. And then the world went white.

The young Padawan was ready for another lesson with his master, Jaro Tapal. Cal was dangling from the ceiling while the Lasat was pacing around him. His lightsaber was lying on the ground, out of reach.

“Padawan. Where is the Force?” he asked.

“Everywhere. It is within me. It surrounds me”.

“Just so. It connects you. There will be times when emotion, pain, or exhaustion trick you. You will feel cut-off. Isolated. This is an illusion. Your lightsaber lies there. Out of reach. But you remain connected through the Force. Feel that energy around you... and summon your weapon”.

“The Force is within you, around you, connecting you to your weapon”, Cal whispered to himself.

He reached out, but his lightsaber merely wiggled.

“You must ignore all distractions”.

Cal focused on himself. No, he focused on the Force within himself. On the Force within the lightsaber. He focused on

the connection between the two of them. He tried again, and his lightsaber jumped into his outstretched hand.

The world became white again. Cal was back on Zeffo, back in the tomb. He was no longer in the ceiling. Instead, he was falling, his lightsaber still out of reach.

Ignore all distractions, he thought. Cal pulled his lightsaber toward him with the Force and then shifted his trajectory slightly, landing not on the distant floor of the tomb, but rather on a stone outcropping.

"The Force is with me", he said. "It connects us".

He pulled a nearby dangling vine toward him, and began scaling back up the tomb's chamber.

But he wasn't safe yet. Proof of that was Trilla's voice. "You survived". She was frustrated.

"Not part of your plan?" he smiled.

"Luckily, I always allow for contingencies".

The 'contingency' in question seemed to be more troopers.

He should have been exhausted, barely able to stand up. But while his body was tired, his connection to the Force was stronger, more vibrant and alive than ever. That was all that mattered. The Force was all that mattered.

Soon, after dealing with the 'contingency', he reached what seemed to be the inner sanctum of the tomb, and Eno Cordova's voice emanated once again from BD-1 as the droid scanned a painting on the wall. It looked like a Zeffo figure holding an offering, and a tower of some sort.

"Here it is. I have finally found an intact representation of this sacred Zeffo artifact. My friend, look closely". He gestured at Cal to move closer. "This is the Zeffo sage Miktrull at the Vault on Bogano. You can see an object in their hand. Based on this imagery, I believe this object allows a Force wielder to perceive the mysteries of the Vault. This is the key, and the guide. The Zeffo Astrium". There was a pause. "But who would destroy images of it and why? It requires more research. However... Our next step's clear... Find an Astrium. If any still exist".

"An Astrium", Cal repeated the name. He turned to BD.
"You ever heard of it?"

"Be-boooooop..."

"Me neither. But a key... yeah, I understand that. Looks like we know what we have to find".

The way out was relatively straightforward. Cal began making his way back through the Imperial territory, toward the Mantis. An unwelcome voice chimes in on his comm.
"Very good, Padawan. You've cleared the way", Trilla said.

"What are you talking about?" Cal asked.

She laughed. "I needed this tomb raised. And now that I have what I need, you're of no use to me". She disconnected, for Cal's relief.

"Can you reverse what she's done?"

"Bee boop beep be-beep".

"Thanks! Let's hope this new encryption keeps her out for good. We should check in with the *Mantis*. Trilla probably knows where they are".

But from the comms only left static noises. "You sure the comm's fixed? They're not answering".

BD beeped positively.

"Something's wrong. We need to get back".

He hurried back to the Mantis, and he was almost there, when suddenly a jet of fire flashed across his vision. He jumped out of the way in time, only to see a heavily armored, jetpack-equipped warrior soaring overhead. The armor was clearly not Imperial. A bounty hunter.

"I've needed a fight. I can't wait to collect on you", the hunter said as he touched down.

After a brief struggle, Cal realized that he had grossly underestimated the bounty hunter. A small dart passed his defenses, sending a powerful electric surge through his body. His vision blurred, and then went dark.

Part Six: Reawaken

Chapter 17

HAXION BROOD ARENA

Cal massaged his head as he opened his eyes. He was laid on the floor, inside a dimly lit cell. "BD... Where are we?" He straightened himself so that he was now seated on the floor "What?"

Cal got up and realized he was alone in the cell and BD was nowhere to be seen. "Little buddy? Where are you?" He looked around the cell. There was no way out of there. He checked his belt, but his lightsaber was gone. *Of course it is*, he thought.

On the far side of the room, there was a loose sheet of metal. As Cal checked the walls more and more, he noticed several loose sheets of metal. Behind one of those was a power cable.

Using the Force, Cal ripped the metal sheet off and yanked the power cable out. "Where should I put this?" Near what seemed like the entrance, there was a power terminal. Cal took the power cable there and plugged it in. The controls fritzed and the door slid open.

"That did it", Cal said as he stepped into the corridor. After checking if there was anyone around, he walked to the far side of the corridor. "Air's cold, stale. Might be underground. Whoever locked me up took my lightsaber and BD. Gotta get them back".

After repeating the trick with a few other power cables, he unlocked the way to yet another room through a narrow ventilation shaft, which he was able to barely squeeze through.

Feels like I'm being watched, he thought. This room is quite large and the only light comes from a large hole in the ceiling that let into an old corridor, or something. Beneath

the hole, there's a much darker and deeper pit. As he approached it, he recognized the corpses of several creatures from the fauna of some of the planets he had been on. "That's not good".

Cal, even though he was beginning to feel creeped out by all of that, he pressed on. After a while, he found a cell with someone familiar behind bars.

"Beepboop!"

"BD-1! I found you! Are you okay?"

"Beepwhoop!"

"Let's get you out of there". *Something's wrong with his voice.*

To open BD's cell, Cal repeated the trick with the power cables. Whoever had made the electrical installation was not much of an electrical technician, it would seem. But maybe that was the point... he had to find out where he was first. Only then could he jump to conclusions.

"Boop boop boop".

"Hey! I'm happy to see you too". Cal checked BD. There was a reason his voice sounded weird. "Let's get that restraining bolt off of you. Jerks". The restraining bolt toppled to the ground, and BD-1 took his familiar place on Cal's shoulder. He looked around the cell they were holding BD-1 in - it was littered with the corpses of other, less fortunate droids.

"Poor droids. Let's get out of here before the same happens to us".

BD agreed.

The two moved out of the cell block area and back toward the pit. Nearby, BD-1 and Cal rerouted some power into an elevator, which took them several levels up. As it rose, they began to hear... cheering? And was that music?

"Hear that?" Cal asked BD. "Sounds like someone is home after all".

The music was familiar - it was the same Cal was listening to when Prauf enlisted his help to unlock the hauler clamps.

What a waste of a good song.

"I recognize this band".

Cal stepped out of the elevator and into a massive arena. There was a huge crowd gathered, but they were safely behind ray-shielded windows on every side. Cal, however, found himself in the middle of said arena and had no protection. In the center of the arena, a massive hologram of a man appeared.

"Ah! Finally, he arrives", the man shouted at the crowd. "We had action on how long it would take for you to get here".

Cal spoke up. "And who are you?"

The hologram and the crowd laughed at the question. "Ha ha ha! Who am I? I am Sorc Tormo, baby. I'm the boss of this operation. You have Greezy four-arms to thank for bringing us together".

"I will. As soon as we get out of here".

Sorc Tormo addressed the audience. "We have a special challenger for you tonight. An enforcer from a bygone era - a Jedi! Let's see what he's got! Oh", he added, "Somebody get baby his toy".

Cal's lightsaber flew through the air. It was thrown so that he wouldn't have been able to catch it, but he used the Force to pull it toward himself. He ignited the blue blade immediately.

"You want a show? I'll give you a show", he said.

Several creatures began emerging from other entrances to the arena. Suddenly, the falling corpses from earlier made more sense.

The man in the hologram sniffed loudly. "Ha! I smell blood and money! Tonight, we celebrate these fallen challengers of the past. And... the great sacrifice they've made", he said sarcastically "To make us all... rich!"

Cal was in no mood to give them the performance they so desperately wanted, and so he disposed of the creatures quickly and tried to use the Force as little as he could. No

point in showing them what he could do. Not when he sensed that this was only the first challenge. However, the crowd doesn't seem to mind it- whenever a limb flies, they cheer.

When he was done, Sorc spoke again. "You get the hang of it quick".

"Maybe you should come down and face me yourself".

Sorc laughed. "I'm too busy counting my credits".

"Be-boop", BD said to his ear.

"I agree, he talks too much".

Shortly after, the doors open once again and more creatures leave their quarters to the arena. Cal keeps himself on a fighting stance and sighs, trying to think of a way out of this unnecessary bloodshed.

"Oooh, uglier than mating season on Yalbec Prime!" Sorc shouted. The crowd laughed at that. "Now that's what I call a fight!"

A massive jotaz lumbered out and attacked Cal. But he held his ground and killed the beast in two moves. The audience was only now beginning to realize how surgical the slaughter was. Their cheers had lost some of their enthusiasm.

"That was my baby...Well, the best is yet to come. I believe you know our next challengers. The Haxion Brood is gunnin' for ya!"

The Huntsman, the bounty hunter that supposedly brought him here, flew out and into the arena, immediately releasing a barrage of missiles at Cal, who dodged them less effortlessly than he thought. That meant he was beginning to get tired.

"You can't run forever!" the hologram shouted.

Cal knew that. But that didn't mean he had to stop fighting. He pulled the Huntsman toward him and struck him with his lightsaber. The Huntsman tried to twist to avoid the blow, but Cal's blade severed his jetpack and cut into his back. The Huntsman shot into the air and, for a

moment, he flew up and away, but then crashed back into the ground.

“You have any idea WHO that was?” Sorc cried. Then he stopped as though someone was talking to him. “What do you mean... *incoming*?”

The walls of the arena gave way as a familiar ship crashed through them.

“It’s the *Mantis*! Blast it!” Sorc said.

Cal didn’t waste any more time and ran toward the outstretched ramp.

Soorc Torno shouted behind him “There is no escape! I will chase you across the galaxy if I have to!”

Cal ignored the petty man and entered the ship. As the *Mantis* flew away, Cal looked back in time to see that the entire arena had been built into the side of an asteroid. *Wicked*, he thought.

Chapter 18

ESCAPE IN THE *MANTIS*

"Hey, Greez. You're famous down there" Cal said as he got inside the bridge.

"Yeah, they're an... ugly group, huh?" the Latero said, regretful that Cal had seen what he saw. "They smell like used droid oil, heh. At least you're okay".

Cere got up from her comms station "Yeah, a complication we could have avoided. Luckily we found you".

"We have another complication", Cal said. "The Empire knows about the holocron".

"That's not good. The entire mission is now at risk".

Cal turned to face Cere for the first time "And I had a nice chat with the Second Sister. Trilla".

Cere realized immediately what that meant. "And... What did she tell you?"

"She told me... she told me you betrayed her to the Empire. Is it true?"

"She'll say anything to jeopardize this mission", Cere tried to deviate the conversation.

"Is it true?" Cal didn't let her.

"She was my apprentice. Before the Purge", she admitted.

"You should have told me", Cal said.

Meanwhile, Greez interrupted them "We're getting an encrypted message from Kashyyyk".

Cal and Cere paused for a moment. Then, frustrated for the interruption, Cal walked to the holo-table to receive the message. A familiar face appeared before him.

"Mari".

"Cal, we found Tarfful and he is willing to meet you. But that's not all. The Empire overran our position at the

refinery. Saw retreated off-world. Some of us have joined the Wookiee fighters in the forests. Be careful”.

Cal nodded. “Thanks. You too”.

The transmission ended. Cal turned toward Cere, an accusatory expression on his face.

“Later”, she said.

No matter how much he wanted to hear the full truth from her, he had to admit that it was something to talk about in another time “Later. We have our lead”, he walked back to the bridge.

“Okay, this is fine. Everything is gonna be fine”, Greez said.

Cal felt light headed with everything that happened since they landed back on Zeffo and he decided to head to his bunk to rest. Shortly after, he was awoken by the Latero.

“Hey kid. Hey, wake up. Can we talk?”

Cal tried to force his eyes open. He was *so* tired. “What?”

“Can we talk? I don’t know what’s going on between you and her. I mean, I figure it’s some kind of Jedi thing. But I don’t think this is the right time for it”.

“It’s not any of your business”, Cal said, regretting having said it right away.

Greez, however, didn’t look offended. “I think it’s my business. We’re all in this together, aren’t we?”

Cal looked away.

“Cal... I made a mistake, and I almost got you killed. I’m sorry. I mean, we all make mistakes. Right?”, he laughed softly. “Well, maybe not you. Hey, why don’t you cut her some slack? I’m not saying do it for me, but you two are the best thing that ever happened in my life. Before you came along, all I cared about was a tight hand on a stiff heater”. Greez looked down at the floor “That’s a game term”, he added.

“I know what it is”, Cal chuckled.

“Cal, life’s not a game”, he sighed. Before you two, all I cared about was myself. Easy money. Now... now it’s different”.

Cal put a hand on Greez's shoulder and smiled. "And you already helped me get out of Bracca alive. I'll always owe you for that".

Greez smiled too. The two of them went back into the cockpit. BD and Cere were already there. The tension in the air had somewhat dissipated, and as they set course for Kashyyyk, Greez made small talk.

"Ya know, even after all the action you two bring, I still get a thrill watching the games".

"As long as you keep your habits in check, Cere said.

"Oh yeah, no, of course. I'm - I'm just a spectator. No gambling or nothing going on".

"Really?" she wasn't convinced.

"Yeah! We're talking pure entertainment. Nothing gets me going more than watching a couple a slubs square off. Just slick moves and brute force! Yah! Ha! Ooh - ooh!"

"Captain, I am slightly troubled by your enthusiasm for something so... barbaric".

"Oh, yeah, I mean... it is. True", Greez admitted, recalling that he was talking to two Jedi. "Totally barbaric. But still... kind of entertaining".

Cal sits down beside the three, exchanging a wordless look with Cere. *Later.*

Part Seven: Into the Forest

Chapter 19

INTO THE SHADOWLANDS

Even from above they could see that the refinery they had taken not so long ago didn't have an Imperial presence. But it didn't have almost any signs of the Partisans either.

On the ground, Cal picked up a Partisan helmet and sensed its Force echo.

Normally, I wouldn't waste my time with the likes of insurgents. Trilla's voice filled his mind. *But I'm looking for a Jedi Padawan. And I know he's been here. And for that...* Cal could hear the partisan gasping for air, while he was being choked. Through the echo, the young Padawan could also hear the hum of the lightsaber and the Partisan's being violently snuffed out. *...and for that, all of you will suffer.*

Shaken, he dropped the helmet and turned to one of the partisans that had been waiting for them - a woman named Mirienna - and Choyyssyk.

"It's good to see you're safe. Choyyssyk and Mari drew a map to your rendezvous point with Tarfful".

"I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner, but I haven't given up on Kashyyyk", Cal said with honesty.

"It's dangerous here", Mirienna admitted. "Saw's already gone and the casualties are just too high".

"No, if you leave, the Wookiees lose support".

"Not all. Mari is staying behind with Choyyssyk and Tarfful. Some of our troops went with them".

"And you?" Cal asked.

"My child already lost one parent. I can't stay". Cal didn't need the Force to sense the ripples of sadness coming out of her. "But me and the others will find a new way to serve the cause".

"Be safe, Mirienna", the Padawan said and she nodded.

Meanwhile, Choyyssyk roared.

"Mari said you were overrun...I didn't realize it would be this bad".

"It's always bad with the Empire, but there's still a chance for your quest", Mirienna told him.

Choyyssyk agreed.

"I'll find a way to help you", Cal told Choyyssyk.

"You've done more than your share. Thank you, Cal", Mirienna said as she and the Wookiee stepped away.

Cal and BD-1 immediately began working their way toward the Shadowlands. It didn't took long for them to be intercepted by two bounty hunters. Even though it wasn't entirely Greez's fault, Cal still cursed him for the problem at Haxion Brood; evidently, Sorc Torno hadn't given up on his Jedi prize, but Cal disposed of them nice and easy. As he reached the path into the Shadowlands in the back of the refinery, Mari's voice came in over his comms. "Cal, do you read me? Cere gave me your comms frequency".

Cal was happy to hear her voice "Mari! Are you okay?"

"I'm safe, unlike too many of the others. Did Mirienna give you our rendezvous coordinates?"

"She did", he said while trying to avoid a mud puddle. "I'm on my way".

"Good. We're just reaching them now, but we can't stay long. The Empire's looking for us".

"I'll be there as soon as I can", Cal promised.

As they advanced deeper and deeper through the thick forest, they began to encounter more and more imperial resistance. Clearly, they were more interested in keeping Partisans stuck in the Shadowlands than they were keeping Jedi out of their refinery.

"Mari, are you there? I'm almost to the Shadowlands. "There's a wreck of a walker. What happened?"

"Saw managed to take one out in the escape", she laughed. "You gave him the idea".

"Is he with you?" he asked.

“No, not anymore. We can talk about it when you get here”.

Kashyyyk seemed to always have more layers. While Cal had felt like he had been descending into the Imperial structure, he realized that it was built several stories above the base of the Shadowlands. As he descended, and after landing in a pool of dirty oil-water, he looked back up at the refinery. It would be difficult to get back up.

Ahead of him, the sun was completely blocked out by the cover of the enormous wroshyr tree he saw when he first came to Kashyyyk, and the extensive foliage that has developed around it. The only light came from flame beetles and... blaster fire? In the Shadowlands, the battle between the Empire and the Partisans had come to a head, but due to the nature of the forest and the foliage, it was difficult to tell where anybody actually was.

After more than half an hour wandering through the kashyyykian trees, Cal had encountered a strange mixture of Wookiee architecture and natural pathways, as he mostly tried to stick to the latter. The twisting branches and vines, the darkness... it would be easy to get turned around, miss the rendezvous with Tarfful, and that would be that. But, fortunately, he made it. Swinging on a thick, ancient vine up to a platform, and there they were – Mari and a group of Wookiee warriors. One of them, with thick grey fur, had to be Tarfful.

“Glad you made it. This is Chieftain Tarfful” Mari said as she pointed exactly at the grey Wookiee.

Tarfful roared. Cal mostly understood what he had said. “I’m on a mission from Master Eno Cordova. He was looking for a Zeffo artifact. Finding it could help save the Jedi”.

Tarfful roared again but this time he didn’t understand. Mari translated it for him. “Cordova found wisdom at the top of the Origin Tree. You should seek answers there”.

Cal looked up at the tree ahead of them. “It’s massive. I don’t even know where to start.”

“Well, you might be able to find a way up through its root system”, Mari told him. “Most of it is underwater. You’ll need this breather”, Se gave him a small, metal device, and Cal takes it remorsefully – breathers used to be standard issue for Jedi, but he had lost his long ago after the Purge.

“Thank you. What will you all do now?” he asked them.

Tarrful answered and Mari translated: “The only thing we can. Keep fighting”.

“What happened between you and Saw?”

“We had a... difference of opinion”, Mari explained. “He thinks the war is lost here”.

“I won’t leave the Wookiees to suffer alone”.

“I wish I could help more”, he said.

“The Empire’s built on fear and indifference. By banding together, we challenge its very existence. This war is far from over, but it’s worth everything to fight it. Even if we don’t know the outcome”, Mari told him.

“Good luck. I hope we meet again”.

Mari and Tarrful nodded as Cal leapt off the platform and into the lake below. The water was dark and murky, but completely unlike the water by the refinery. This darkness came from nutrients, plants, and wildlife - life, not from oil and pollution. The Force was strong here.

He swam by following the underwater pathway of twisting branches and roots from the Origin Tree. He thought to himself that going to the giant tree in the center of Kashyyyk would probably have been his first instinct even without Tarfful’s guidance, but it was good to be sure.

Cal emerged from the murky water and scaled a particularly high natural wall. On the other side, stormtroopers were locked in futile combat with the native creatures of Kashyyyk. Cal was disappointed to see how deeply the Empire had reached, but not surprised.

“Not even Tarfful could keep them out forever”.

“Woooo...” BD said sadly.

"They won't stop until everyone's wiped out", Cal said to himself.

He had to fight his way deeper, eventually reaching a massive vine that led up the Origin Tree. Dutifully, Cal began to climb.

"BD, do you think the Empire would've come after Kashyyyk so hard if I hadn't intervened?"

"Be-beep", the little droid wasn't sure.

Cal put the blame on himself. "The Jedi are supposed to be symbols of hope, but... I led the Inquisition here. Mari and Tarfful put their trust in me. Did I just endanger them again?"

"Be-boop woooo..."

Using a gelatinous plant, Cal propelled himself even higher, landing on a wooden platform constructed at some point in the distant past by Wookiees. A squadron of stormtroopers, led by one of the incessant Purge Troopers, were waiting for him.

"You see him too... right?" one stormtrooper asked out loud, his finger in the trigger, but his hands were shaking.

"He's here. Inform the Inquisitor! I'll keep him busy..."

Or so he thought. A powerful Force push from Cal was all it took to send the black trooper flying off the platform altogether. After dealing with the rest of the squadron, Cal noticed that the platform was part of a larger network of Wookiee buildings built into the tree, and he began to follow the narrow wooden bridges upward. Suddenly, an Imperial shuttle rose up from the depths of the Shadowlands, its blasters pointed at Cal. The door opened. Expecting to see the Second Sister, Cal was almost relieved when the other Inquisitor from Bracca emerged. And then he remembered that the other one was the *big one*. The relief disappeared quickly.

"What's this?" the Ninth Sister laughed. "A Bracca scrap rat playing Jedi? I told the Grand Inquisitor you wouldn't be stupid enough to show your face here again. Especially

after we wiped out that feeble resistance". She sighed loudly. "Love it when I'm wrong".

The Ninth Sister stepped back into her shuttle, and it fired a spray of deadly blaster fire at Cal. He avoided a direct hit, but the explosion tore the floor out from underneath him. Luckily, the Wookiees did not build their settlements directly over nothing – he landed on a sort of muddy hill running along the wroshyr trees, and began to slide rapidly down. The Inquisitor's shuttle chased after him, peppering the ground with more blasts and explosions.

As Cal descended, more TIE fighters filled the sky, adding their blasts to the chaos around him. It was moments like these that Cal knew that the Force must be with him – else he would surely have been blasted to atoms a long time ago. That, or the Imperials had horrible aim, which wasn't so untrue.

The muddy hill opens into a clearing, and another shuttle banked around: a clear shot. But before the pilot could pull the trigger, an enormous winged monster crashed into the shuttle, sending it careening down onto a clearing ahead of him. An enormous fireball filled the air. Cal could even fill the heat of the explosion. "What is that thing?"

"Bo-beep boop".

"The Ninth Sister's searching for us. I should call... on second thought, she listens to the transmissions. Let her find out on her own".

Cal lands in another murky puddle, but realizes that miraculously his way to the top had actually been cleared. There was no Imperial resistance ahead, and the air support must be avoiding the native monster. He approached a path alongside the Origin Tree, and placed his hand on its ancient trunk. He sensed a strong Force echo. For generations, the Wookiees made a pilgrimage to the top. The tree... guided them?"

That would certainly explain how he seemed to keep falling closer to his destination.

Chapter 20

THE ORIGIN TREE

Cal was almost near the summit. The massive winged creature from earlier was resting on the path, licking its wounds from its headlong crash into the Imperial shuttle. While Cal didn't know what it was, he could see that it was a majestic creature. Its white feathers shone with the light.

BD beeped.

"Shhh..." Cal warned him. "We don't know if it's friendly".

BD couldn't see a problem with that.

"That's the thing that took down the Ninth Sister. We have to be careful".

With that, the creature took off again, and Cal ran past it, not questioning his good luck. On cue, Eno Cordova's voice announced from BD-1's speakers. "My Friend, as Tarfful led us here he spoke of a glorious creature called the Shyyyo Bird. He said the bird is the forest's protector. So rare it's nearly legendary. I would dearly love to research this creature further, but the Astrium must be my priority. I hope to one day return and search for the Shyyyo bird with Tarfful".

The hologram disappeared and Cal pressed on.

After a while, Cal came across a massive gap in the path. Once, he could have cleared it, but even with his relationship with the Force much improved, it was impassable for him now. It served as a reminder of how much he could still improve. He focused on his journey up to that point and was able to see and hear his master again, once again teaching a lesson to his younger self.

"Get up! Try again", Master Tapal said.

"I just keep failing master", young Cal admitted.

“Do you? Good. Keep failing, keep getting back up. That is the only way to succeed. Do not allow yourself to be weighed down by ego and pretense. Let go of what you fear to lose and rise up”.

Taking that teaching to heart, the vision of Tapal vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Cal closed his eyes and leapt across the chasm, in a true leap of faith. It was an impossibly far distance without the aid of the Force. But Cal cleared it easily. His doubt was gone. His relationship with the Force had been fully restored. He could now use it fully to follow the path of Cordova and strike a blow against the Empire.

“Just gotta keep getting back up, BD”.

The little droid understood it clearly.

“As long as we get back up we’re still in this fight”.

BD beeped happily.

“I’m finally back to where I was before the Purge”, Cal explained. “Before Master Tapal died”.

They carried on a bit further, and as they did, the Shyyyo bird landed in front of them again. It was distressed, crying out in pain.

BD was nervous.

“It’s hurt”, Cal realized. “Think we can help it?”

However, the Shyyyo bird had no interest in that – it lifted itself back up and shot itself into the sky. Cal had no choice but to continue further into the forest.

The two friends came across another platform, and this time, the Shyyyo Bird landed on it and seemed reluctant to move again. Its injuries had worsened. Cal approached it cautiously.

The little droid was concerned with the bird.

“Yeah, we can help it but we have to be careful”, Cal said. “I don’t want to spook it”. He turned to the Shyyyo bird. “Hey! It’s okay! We’re not here to hurt you. We’re friends, understand? Friends”, he said as he held his hands in the air, trying to show they were not going to hurt it.

BD shuffled off Cal's shoulder and toward the massive creature, beeping quizzically, as if the Shyyyo Bird could tell the droid what was hurting. Cal wished for a moment that instead of constant visions and echoes, he had the gift to commune with animals. BD-1 began scanning it.

"It's okay", Cal said as he tried to spread a message of harmony through the Force. Because the Force was in everything and in everyone, even though the bird couldn't understand Cal, maybe the Padawan could share his emotions of friendliness.

BD-1 completed its scan, and looked somewhat sarcastically at a massive piece of metal protruding from the creature's wing, as if to ask if he really had to spend time scanning it to notice that.

"It's a piece of the Ninth Sister's ship", examining it. "We need to remove it". He turned to the bird and, without knowing if it would work, he touched it with the Force. "This is gonna hurt, okay? I'm sorry". Somehow, he had the feeling that the bird understood.

Cal pulled on the piece with the Force, tearing it out of the Shyyyo bird. It cried out in pain, but before it could start to thrash around - likely knocking Cal and BD-1 off the platform and to their certain doom - Cal grabbed a healing stim from BD and stuck it into the injured wing. The anesthetic within started working and the bird got up slowly, measuredly.

"There you go", Cal said, smiling.

The Shyyyo bird bent its neck down toward Cal, who stroked its beak.

"It's the least we could do".

He wondered, for a moment, if the Shyyyo Bird would let him ride it to the top - but before he could indulge in this idea for too long, it rose up and flew away again. Immediately, Cordova's voice projected from BD-1 again. "My Friend. Never have I seen a view more exquisite than atop this tree. This climb has given me time to reflect. It

was the will of the Force that I found Bogano, and that I am here now. There is a greater journey ahead”.

Helpful as always, Cal thought. The young Padawan circled around the three... and the Shyyyo Bird was waiting for him again, its neck bowed - as if it sensed Cal's earlier twinge of disappointment.

“You're giving us a lift...?”

The bird purred. Cal hoped on, and the Shyyyo bird took off into the air. The view was truly magnificent, no doubt better than the one Cordova had from the tree. From up there, the forests, mountains, and water of Kashyyyk shone endlessly brighter than the spots of pollution and massive mineral production.

“There's still so much the Empire hasn't touched”, Cal smiled.

The trip to the Origin Tree was quick and, once there, the Shyyyo Bird let them hop off. There was a familiar structure there - it looked nothing like the Wookiee architecture Cal had seen so far, but rather, that of the Zeffo. BD-1 obediently ran up to it, scanned it, and then projected a new hologram of Cordova.

“At last, I found my quarry. The Astrium”. The hologram was holding up a strange spherical object in its hand. “Used by the Zeffo Sages millennia ago. I hold in my hand a piece of galactic history. Oh, I will never be able to thank Tarfful enough. Do you know what this means, my friend? No need to return to Dathomir. The darkness clouded every attempt at finding the Astrium inside Kujet's Tomb there but the Force... the Force has provided a new path”.

The hologram shut off.

“Kujet's tomb... on Dathomir”, told himself.

He turned to leave, to return to the Shyyyo Bird. It was still waiting for him expectantly, but as he approached, a salvo of fire struck it in the shoulder. The bird cried out and fell.

“NO!” Cal shouted.

Behind it, the Ninth Sister's shuttle swooped in and landed atop the Origin Tree.

The door opened, and the Ninth Sister strode out, confidently. She had none of the calculated patience and menace of Trilla - she was enraged and impatient, her lightsaber already drawn. Cal drew his own to meet hers.

"Found you again!" she shouted at him.

"You're done hurting this world".

"I don't know what's got Second Sister thinking you're so important. She likes her souvenirs but... I'm not in it for the memories and honestly, you're not worth my time. So let's make this quick", her voice sounded like dry thunder. But, honestly, Cal didn't care. Like her, he was not in this for the memories. He was here to defeat the Empire. And right now, *she* was the Empire.

The Ninth Sister strode forward. Unlike Trilla, she was big, sloppy and slow. However, he knew she had become an Inquisitor for a reason. Even though he didn't know what it was, he couldn't underestimate her. However, as he parried her attack, the blow sent him sprawling. What she lacked in speed, the Ninth Sister made up for in raw, brute strength.

"Are we fighting or what?" She laughed. She kept striking and Cal only had two options: parry or dodge. "Scared of getting burned?" She shoved Cal with the Force and leapt up, slamming her lightsaber into the ground. Cal took the opportunity to roll around behind her and was rewarded for his speed with a glancing blow on her heavily armored arm. Furiously, she shoved him backward and into the side of the Origin Tree. "Not bad for trash".

Cal produced a smirk. "What about for a Jedi?"

The Inquisitor spat on the floor. "Is there a difference?" She ignited the second blade of her lightsaber and charged forward, slamming into Cal's chest with her shoulder. She began a furious barrage, the dual-blades further compensating for the slow, brutish nature of her blows.

She knocked Cal back again, and threw her lightsaber at him with enough force that it spun. Cal parried and took his chance – he rushed forward and brought his lightsaber down. The Ninth Sister pulled her own blade back in time and they locked blades, each pushing as hard as they could. It was a stalemate Cal knew he could only hold for a moment. She was far stronger than him. In a moment, she would overpower him, kill him, and then kill his friends. *No.*

No.

To answer power with power was not the Jedi way. Trash or not, he was a Jedi. And he would always be. His Master had made sure of that.

Cal released the tension, and as the Ninth Sister fell deeper into her strike, he jumped and spun in midair, his lightsaber blade catching her descending hand and severing it completely. She fell on the ground, grasping the glowing hot stump on her arm.

“It’s over”, Cal told her.

She smiled. “Being an Inquisitor taught me no set-back is too great. When you’ve already lost yourself, a limb’s easy”. Behind Cal, her lightsaber rose, pulled by the Force. “You know, I was a Jedi. It’d be fun to bring you in”. She shared as her floating lightsaber ignited. “Watch you crack like the rest of us!”

Cal jumped out of the way just in time, and the Ninth Sister caught the lightsaber in her other hand.

“Just wait ‘till the isolation!” She charged and Cal parried.

“Torture!”

Another charge. “Mutilation!”

And another. “And your friends...”

Enough! “I won’t let you touch them”.

“You can’t stop the Empire!”. They locked blades on more time.

He knew what she wanted him to do. To lose focus, to lose strength... to lose his hope. But that would never happen. He had the Force on his side. And this was going to stop

here and now. No, he could not stop the Empire. "But I can stop you".

His resolve steeled, Cal parried what would be the Ninth Sister's final blow, and released a blast of Force energy. Off-balance, both externally and within herself, the Ninth Sister was sent crashing through the tangled branches of the Origin Tree... and careening to the ground of Kashyyyk. Not even the Dark Side could survive that fall.

There was a pause. The silence was deafening.

"Booo..." BD said softly.

"Yeah..." Cal couldn't stop but grin. "We just took down an Inquisitor". There was a loud noise, and for a moment Cal thought he had spoken too soon. But it was not the Ninth Sister - the Shyyyo Bird flew back up onto the platform, trilling happily.

"Hey! We thought you were dead". He petted it affectionately. "I'm glad you're okay. We should get back. Cere and Greez are expecting us".

With the help of the Shyyyo Bird, Cal made his way back to the *Mantis*.

Chapter 21

INSIDE THE *MANTIS*

Cal entered the *Mantis* and sat down with Cere and Greez, who are in the middle of a meal. They shared some of it with the Padawan.

"Cordova believed the key to the Vault is on Dathomir".

"You find your Wookiee?" Greez asked.

"Yep. But things are bad down there. Empire is everywhere".

Cere looked at him. "Inquisitors?"

"Well, Trilla..." he caught himself in time. "... the Second Sister... is gone for now. But she's still chasing us". He then casually added. "I defeated the Ninth Sister".

BD nodded in accordance.

Cere and Greez looked at each other, down at their plates, and then back at Cal.

"When I was captured by the Empire... I resisted. I swore to myself that I would die before I would talk".

Cal put down his utensils and looked at Cere, unsure if he wanted to hear this.

"But then this... dark shadow came. And he was worse than any... nightmare I could have imagined. And I still fought. But in the end, I came apart".

Cal looked away. Breaking apart had meant giving up on her own Padawan.

"And I gave them Trilla. And I know there's nothing I can do to make that right. But Cal, there's still a chance we can save the others on the holocron".

Cal couldn't take it anymore. "Okay, look. The Ninth Sister said something about becoming an Inquisitor, like... like it's inevitable. But you went through the same thing she did. And you didn't join them".

“Cal...”

“It’s okay, Cere. We’ll find Cordova’s holocron”. Cal got up and walked away. BD-1 clambers onto the table and started scanning Greez’s meal. “Hey! Get your lasers off my lunch!”

BD-1 beeped, jumped off and scurried away. Cal approached the holo-table, analyzing it until he found Dathomir. With a deep breath, he selected it.

“Setting course for... wait, you wanna go to Dathomir?” Greez asked.

“I’m surprised Cordova went there”, Cere said. “He must have had a good reason”.

“I’m staying put on the Mantis once we arrive. Red sunlight cannot be good for your skin”, Greez added to his usual rant.

“This place used to be home to a powerful cabal of Force wielders known as the Nightsisters”.

“They used the Force?” Greez asked. “What, like Jedi?”

“No. These witches served only themselves. Their powers focused on deception, illusion, manipulation”.

“Sounds like someone I used to know”, Greez laughed.

The Mantis rose up in the atmosphere and made the jump into hyperspace.

Cere added. “During the Clone Wars the Nightsisters made a deal with a Sith Lord who betrayed their trust. In the end, they were nearly wiped out in a massacre. Dathomir is a deadly place. We should be careful”.

“Don’t have to tell me twice”.

Part Eight: The Blood Planet

Chapter 22

ABOVE DATHOMIR

After getting some rest, Cal took his seat in the cockpit as the ship left hyperspace. Right below them was Dathomir – an unnaturally blood-red planet usually associated with death. Especially for outsiders like themselves.

The *Mantis* landed on a tight spot but from where an ancient ruin could be seen built into the side of a mountain. Even with sunlight hitting them directly through the windshield, Cal felt cold. The entire planet was strong with the dark side of the Force.

Cere left the ship and Cal followed while Greez remained indoors. Before Cal left, Greez held the young Padawan's arm. "Hey, Cal. You and her..." he gestured vaguely at Cere, "is everything alright?"

"I don't know. That's not what's important right now".

"You know, Cere believes in you. To tell you the truth, I didn't really think that much of you at first".

"I noticed", Cal smiled.

"I mean, she got me to follow you to the scariest place in the galaxy, so..."

"Heh...yeah", Cal had to admit. Cere had complete trust in his capabilities. He just didn't know if he had complete trust in hers "that's true".

"Well, I hope you two can sort this thing out soon so we can finish this quest and go relax somewhere. I know a great castle of Takodana that makes the best Bloody Rancors in the galaxy".

Cal frowned. "Huh. You hungry?"

"Cal, buddy... have you been outside? Do you know where we are? This is not a place to relax and eat. Let's get going". He then added. "But yes. I'm starving".

Cal laughed and decided to get going. Right outside, Cere was waiting for him.

"Cal, do you have a moment?"

Cal nodded, and walked over to her, trying not to pay too much attention to the eerie light around them. The Force was strong in this place, but it is not the Force Cal knows. And by searching his feelings and remembering his encounters with the Inquisitors, he realized that it wasn't exactly the dark side of the Force that was upsetting him. Something felt deeply wrong here.

"You've come a long way since Bracca, but the path is far from over. I want you to know the difficult challenges ahead".

"I can handle it", Cal said.

"I know what you can do. I'm not denying that", she knew that it was not the Cal he knew talking, but the one that doubted her after learning about Trilla.

"And I know what has to be done. I've done it before".

"Cal, even the strongest of Jedi..."

"I'm not Trilla", he said finally. But after seeing her eyes widen even more and her face becoming pale with the explicit mention, he knew he had probably gone too far. "I'll be fine", there was not time for that now.

"I know you're not. I didn't say that".

"I'm not asking you to say anything. It's okay. Cere. Really".

"Just be safe, Cal", she looked in his eyes so that he could see the sincerity of her words. "That's all".

"Thank you. And I know we haven't been on great terms, but can I talk to you about something? I need your help with something".

"I'm listening", she rested her hands on her hips.

"I've reconnected with the Force but... I still feel blocked".

"How so?"

"Every time I open myself up, I see Master Tapal", he confessed.

"You felt this yet you've continued deepening your connection to the Force. You know what that says to me?"

"That I don't know what's good for me?"

"That you're strong enough to embrace your emotions. Give yourself time".

"Cere, I... thanks for helping me. Means a lot".

Finally, Cere nodded at his words and returned to the ship and Cal looked around, eyes lingering on the temple ruins ahead of them.

Here we go, he thought.

Chapter 23

DATHOMIRIAN RUINS

Cal and BD headed toward the temple. Between them and their objective, there was a great amount of wrecked buildings and other unidentifiable ruins. If what Cere thought had happened was real, then all that destruction had been preserved since the Clone Wars. However, even though he wasn't planning on meeting any Nightsister, who were all dead, he could hear and feel several different animals roaming the ruins. Animals that had been born on a planet strong in the dark side. They wouldn't be friendly.

Cal leapt across a gap between the ship's platform and the main area, and began climbing parts of the ruins. As he had sensed, he encountered several creatures that were, indeed, not friendly. But with the Force and a lightsaber by his side, there was no stopping him now.

In about fifteen minutes, Cal and BD had made it to the outer section of the temple. Still lit, there was a campfire of sorts. Sensing a Force echo in one of the stones around the campfire, Cal crouched to sense it. The memory wasn't powerful but it made him hear a Nightsister chanting strange words.

"A Nightsister... practicing her craft", he told BD.

A couple meters ahead, the duo of explorers came across a set of doors. They were not unlike the usual blast doors from the *Venator* class ships or in the Imperial installations, but as it slid open, Cal heard a loud set of gears grinding in effort. Nightsisters might have been powerful, but they operated on a low tech level. Cal stepped inside and walked deeper into the shrine. BD called Cal near a set of glyphs carved into the walls. What Cal thought were simply Dathomirian symbols turned out to be familiar.

"Looks like the Zeffo were here", he said.

BD agreed. Cal got up and looked around. "Strange..." he said. "This place seems abandoned but..." he stopped talking as he sensed danger before seeing a huge ball of green energy materialize before him. The green mist swirled around and coalesced into a corporeal form. When the mist was gone, all that was left was a pale-skinned, tattooed woman, who was not much older than Cal, and dressed in red clothes matching Dathomir's landscape itself. She strode toward Cal and spoke with a strange accent.

"You trespass, Jedi".

"You must be a Nightsister", he said. "I thought you were all dead".

"Not all". She gestured and some more green mist appeared again and materialized in two male Zabrak. They had been summoned at her bidding. Each Zabrak was heavily tattooed as well, their eyes burning with green flames. "Dathomir is forbidden for you. Leave at once".

"I'm afraid I can't do that, but", he held his hands in the air, indicating that he didn't want to fight. "Perhaps we could help each other. You see, I..." he took a step forward, but the Zabrak immediately brandished their weapons and moved to attack him.

"Easy, I'm not your enemy", Cal stopped walking.

"Your actions say otherwise", the Nightsister said.

"Wait, hold on!"

In a blast of green mist, the Nightsister was gone, leaving the Zabrak behind. Their eyes glowing even more now, they attacked.

Proving the Nightsister wrong, instead of killing the Zabrak, Cal used his blade to cut down their weapons and used the Force to send them reeling backwards and falling a few meters below. Looking over the ridge, Cal saw that, beside angry, they were fine.

He continued up and through the temple. There were several more Zabrak armed with maces, and some even with energy bows of some kind, but without the Nightsister's aid they were no match for Cal. Privately, he was grateful that she had left them to do her dirty work.

Finally, Cal emerged from the other end of the temple, and realized that the structure he had been in fighting through was only the smaller of two temples. Connecting the two was a massive bridge across a chasm, but the center of the bridge had been destroyed. As he approached it, he noticed something curious – a workstation of sorts, set by the exit of the first temple.

The decorations around the workstation were clearly Dathomirian, but the parts were familiar. It reminded Cal of the workstation on the old Jedi cruiser, the Crucible. There, the venerable droid Huyang had taught Jedi younglings how to craft their own first lightsabers. Cal had made one, but it had been lost... some time ago. Somebody had crafted, or worked on, a lightsaber here. He grabbed and placed his own weapon – Jaro Tapal's lightsaber – at the center of the table.

For a while, Cal examined the components. Lastly, he opened it for the first time in a long time. All the wires and components were organized just like his Master had left them and, in the middle of all of it, Cal saw the kyber crystal that powered it, shining blue. Cal remembered one of the first lessons Huyang gave him and all the other younglings that were in his group: *Yes, you have brought me crystals, but they're all useless unless you give them life. Do you know how to awaken the Force within the crystal? No? Then I suggest you listen and learn.* And that's what Cal did. He listened to the spark within the kyber as he added new connections and rewired the old ones. Using the materials around the table and his own tools from Bracca, Cal, guided by the Force, extended his lightsaber, made it his own. While he was working, he sensed BD moving from

one side of the workstation to the other, trying to see every detail of Cal's work.

When he was done, he lifted his lightsaber to examine his handiwork. Certainly the time he had spent on Bracca had given him a help here. But that was the whole point. This lightsaber was the example of Cal's journey – his basic knowledge and the saber itself belonged to the past, while the new additions were made by him, the Padawan that survived. He ignited the saber and the familiar blue blade appeared. Then, he pressed a new switch and a second blue blade emerged from the bottom. He twirled it a little, somewhat pleased with himself and then clipped it back in the belt. *Time to go.*

He resumed his way toward the bridge, and sensed a faint echo in the Force. "Someone was drawn to something here... energy from the ruins?" He was sure that whatever he encountered along the way would answer his question. That was the way of the Force. When he reached the top of the bridge, he encountered a man there, dressed in a dark robe. The man was human, older, and leaning against the stone of the bridge. His hood covered part of his face.

"Oh, fellow wanderer!" he said when he saw Cal. "I see you met the resident Nightsister but, uh...unlike most, you're alive".

Cal looked at him suspiciously, as the man's eyes drifted to Cal's hip. With instincts born of five years hiding his identity, Cal covered his weapon.

"Ooh, a lightsaber. No, no, don't hide it. That would explain your survival", he smiled faintly.

Still unsure why the man was there, he thought he might get some answers from this wanderer. "Who are you?"

"You don't..." he was about to say something but changed his mind. "No, no one to fear. No. Just a traveler. Studying the nature of extinct cultures and dead philosophies".

Cal stepped closer. "You studying the Nightsisters?"

“Ooh...I study many things”, he chuckled. “But yes, that Nightsister. Oh. She was only a child... when the war came to this world. She had to watch her whole family perish”.

Cal pointed at the ruins. “What do you know about those ruins?”

“Oh”, he chuckled again. “Ancient beyond belief. The Nightsister and her warrior kin... were seduced by the power that lurks within. A... avoid the ruin. Or suffer the same fate”.

Still thinking if that was a threat or a warning, Cal asked “How do you know so much about the Nightsister?”

“Observation”, the wanderer said. “I’ve seen many things since coming here”. There was truth in his voice. Just not the whole truth.

“What does that mean?”

“Must it mean something? Too many great minds have gone astray in pursuit of... order”.

“How long have you been here?” probably that would have helped build such a confused mind.

“Long enough. This world provided a sanctum when I was in need. Shelter when I was weak. Enlightenment when I was lost in the dark”, another dry chuckle.

Cal could now sense something strange coming from the man. Like everything on this planet, there was a strange thing about it. “Right... I gotta get going”.

“Beware! Dathomir’s mysteries are many”.

Cal decided to ignore the wanderer’s warnings. He turned to the bridge, and with a burst of Force energy, propelled himself across the gap. As he ran across, a group of Nightbrothers came out to meet him, but with a Force-powered shove, Cal sent them careening off the edge of the bridge. Soon, he reached the end of the bridge, a small wooden platform, but realized that the wall in front of him was too high for him to jump up, even with his restored power. There are, however, small greaves and holes in the stone.

He turned to BD. "Looks climbable, but not without equipment..."

Suddenly, a Nightbrother jumped toward him "Die!"

Cal, who had let himself get distracted, had his guard down. The Nightbrother heaved a massive boulder off the top of the wall, shattering the wooden section of the bridge Cal was standing on. He plummeted down, but was able to slide along the foundations of the temple to survive the fall. He realized that, at the very least, he was on the right side of the bridge now... simply much further down than he would have liked. After a bit of exploration – and some dead native creatures – he found a gap in the side of the wall that led into the bottom levels of the ruin. There were some strange, slimy pods hanging from the ceiling, but other than that, it seems as normal as anything else on Dathomir.

As he entered, the familiar green mist swirled around him, coalescing again into the face of the Nightsister he encountered earlier. *Not again*, he thought.

"You will go no further", she said.

"Stand aside", Cal said as he unclipped his lightsaber.

"No. He was right about you".

Who? "Who...what?"

"Jedi are thieves and selfish liars who bring nothing but death".

"Back off. If you attack me again, I'll strike you down", Cal positioned his lightsaber before him, ready to be ignited.

"Oh, I won't do a thing. But my murdered sisters... they will have their revenge".

Green energy shot from her fingers and toward the hanging pods. They opened, and the emaciated corpses of Nightsisters long past dropped out of them. Slowly, as the mist worked its way into their bodies, they began to rise. The Nightsister who called them vanished, leaving Cal to deal with the horrifying result of her magic once again. Cal quickly found that although they were extremely strong, the undead were, well... fragile. The problem was that they

outnumbered Cal, who wanted to remain very much alive. Even as he advanced, it became clear that the Nightsister did not merely animate the pods in the first room, but instead invoked a deeper magic that awoke them throughout the entire temple. And although defeating them was well within Cal's skill, there was something deeply unsettling about killing the risen for a second time. The Nightsister's disembodied voice sounds through the air. "You will pay for their deaths..."

"How does that Nightsister keep following us?"

"Boo-wooo... beep?"

"Cere called them Force wielders, but I've never seen it used this way before. We'd better stay on our toes. Wait, do you... have toes?"

"Beep!"

As they climbed, Cal spotted some kind of winged blot on the horizon. He had a feeling that it was nothing as friendly as the Kashyyykian Shyyyo Bird. "Any idea what that flying creature is?" he asked his little companion. The droid had no idea. "Let's hope we don't find out".

They pressed on further. Dathomir was more hostile than he had even imagined. Every creature here was out for blood, and the Nightbrothers were the worst of them. Eventually, Cal realized the area he was in was almost... residential? "This must be where the Nightbrothers live", he said.

Chapter 24

FREE FLIGHT

Just beyond the area Cal and BD found themselves in, they saw a massive gate. There was a chasm between Cal and the gate, and the bridge - a metallic behemoth of a pass - had been retracted. Nightbrothers stood guard above it on the battlements, firing energy arrows at Cal, who avoided them easily. The Nightsister was standing with them. With a grunt, Cal yanked the bridge down with the Force.

"It's the outsider!" one of the undead Zabrak shouted. "He's lowered the bridge!"

"Take him out", the Nightsister ordered.

If she's so powerful, why doesn't she face me personally? Not that Cal wanted to fight her, but it was an honest thought. Cal rushed across, parrying the energy bolts as he did so. The main gate was locked, and although Cal could have cut through it with his lightsaber, the barrage from the battlements above would quickly kill him. Luckily, there was a narrower path around the side of the fortification. He decided to take it, hoping that it would lead him where he needed to go.

After fighting through more undead Nightsisters, it was hard for Cal not to imagine what the vengeful Nightsister would look like when she died. After all, they all looked the same. The thought that perhaps they all looked the same when *alive* quickly crossed his mind. He had more pressing matters to attend to: not getting killed.

"The Nightsisters used to call their leader Mother. She used powerful Magick", he told BD.

A Nightbrother, perhaps angry at the mention of the word Mother, yelled out at Cal, but before he could attack, the enormous winged creature from earlier swooped down and

scooped the Nightbrother out. He screamed as he was carried off.

Wow! Cal screamed in his head. He and BD looked at each other, speechless. Cal pressed on a few more meters and found his reward - stone steps. Back up the ruins. As he climbed them, voices came unbidden through a Force echo, which was unusual for Cal, but he gave in and listened to them carefully.

The first voice was the Nightsister's "There is no place for you here! The Brothers will kill you if you stay".

The second, however, was familiar and was filled with darkness. "Come, I'm certain they are no match for your power".

Cal tried not to think too hard about what it meant - he supposed that the wanderer may not have been entirely truthful when he told Cal that he learned about the Nightsister through 'observation', not that it came as a surprise. At least, however, he was drawing closer to his goal. The Nightsister's disembodied voice spoke to him. This time, it didn't belong to any memory. It was real.

"Only death awaits you here".

The stairs broke off suddenly, and Cal jumped down into a massive, dark clearing. On the other side was a wall. It looked that, by scaling it, he could continue. But before he tried to test his theory, the enormous winged monster returned, screeching. The Nightbrother it took earlier clearly didn't satiate it for long enough.

The creature landed on the floor and lunged at Cal, who jumped out of the way, hacking at its wings as he did so. His lightsaber seemed to scratch more than dismember it, and so the fight was going to be a long one: the creature, growing increasingly frustrated, snapped at Cal with its beak and charged at him with its prehensile Taroons, but the Jedi was too quick. Cal, meanwhile, delivered what felt like a thousand cuts to the creature, but none seemed to matter, save to enrage it.

More enraged than before, the creature gave up on what it thought was an easy meal and flew away. Cal paused for a moment to catch his breath and inject a med stim before making his way over to the wall. An unfortunate Nightbrother corpse was still at the base, but on his hands were a pair of clawed gloves. Perfect for climbing the wall. Cal gently took the gloves, and began scaling.

The climb is longer than he expected. If that wasn't enough, the creature returned swooping in, hoping to catch Cal on the stone wall.

"Stay low buddy! Don't let it hit you!" he shouted to BD, who was holding itself to Cal's clothes with all the strength in his small mechanical legs.

Cal scrambled up, rocks crumbling around him, but before he could reach safety, the creature's claws wrapped around him and it soared away.

Oh, not good! Cal thought. He would have screamed it, but the creature was holding him so tightly, he could barely breathe.

As they rose upward, Cal hit the beast with his lightsaber, and this time the blade went cleanly through its foot. Screaming, the beast threw Cal even higher up into the sky. Perfect. Cal put his arms by his side, accelerating down and onto the creature's back. Desperate, the creature began to fly directly at a nearby stone pillar.

Before the moment of impact Cal threw himself off, landing on the precarious, crumbly rock. "Whooa! I don't know how we're gonna get down from this. It's a long drop!"

"Beep boop beep?" The creature was returning to end them once again.

"Jump again?"

"Bee-beep".

"Okay, I trust you", he sighed. And then, he threw himself off the pillar.

He landed on the creature again, and they plummeted down. Frantically, it smashed into nearby branches and

stone outcroppings – but it had become less coordinated, more desperate. It crashed to the ground. Can and BD jumped out of it.

Finally, it was motionless.

“Are you okay?” he asked the little droid.

“Beep! Boo?”

“Yeah, I’m great. Wish I could say the same for this creature though”.

“Bo-boo...”

Cal made his way back toward the temple. The beast crashed a fair distance away, but the claws he had found earlier sped the process considerably. He worked his way back into the Nightbrother’s settlement, where resistance had largely disappeared.

Along the way, near old pottery, he heard more voices through another Force echo.

There were two Nightbrothers talking to one another. “We have sacrificed too many, he’s too dangerous. We should kill him!” One said.

The other voice quickly followed. “No, we take him to Brother Viscus”.

Mmmm, thought Cal. *Who is ‘him’? The wanderer?* One more question to add to the ever rising pile.

Cal made his way out of the village and into the temple itself. He was close now. Cere called in. Whatever their differences were right now, he was grateful to hear a voice of someone who didn’t want to kill him.

“Cal, have you found the tomb?”

“Close”, he said. But then he added “but I got a little sidetracked”.

“Greez is acting strange. He swears he saw someone outside the Mantis. Dathomir is getting to him”. That felt like her cue to tell him to hurry.

“Pretty sure that’s who he is”.

“Are you alright?”

"I'm not seeing things, so... yes?" he chuckled. "I'm coming out of the Nightbrother village now. Hoping to get back on track".

"Sounds like you're handling yourself", Cal could even hear the smile on her voice.

"Yeah, BD and I got this". BD chirped in agreement,
And then, finally, they arrived.

Cal approached the entrance. Like Kashyyyk, the tomb's construction had a strange mixture of Zeffo and Dathomirian architecture. On cue, BD-1 began playing one of its recordings from Master Cordova.

"My Friend, we've reached the Tomb of Kujet in search of an Astrium. It is even more secluded than even I would've thought. It seems the way was secret even during the time of the Zeffo. A contrast from the ostentatious Tomb of Miktrull... yet not a welcome one. The Nightsisters of Dathomir granted me passage, but even they warned me against these ruins. Something dark transpired here... I can feel it".

So do I, he thought. Master Cordova's words in mind, Cal approached a second gate into the tomb. He reached out with the Force, sensing something faint. It vanished as quickly as it came.

"Whatever that was... it's gone".

Unsure how to proceed, Cal took a seat, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was back on a Clone Wars Star Destroyer.

Not again...

Chapter 25

ORDER 66

Cal Kestis was inside his quarters when he woke up suddenly. *Weird*, he thought. The door opened and he was back in the corridors of the *Venator* class ship. Near one of the blast doors was one of the clone troopers under the command of his Master.

"Hey, Cal! Ready for a rematch later?"

"Yeah, anytime!" Cal always felt that the little games and training he had with the clones in his free time were good for team building as well as putting into exercise everything his master taught him.

"Sounds good. On your way to training?"

"Always".

"Alright then, I'll see you later".

"Bye!"

Cal went past the corner and found two more clones chatting in the hallway.

"I heard we're getting new orders soon", one said.

The other laughed. "Finally! I'm ready to be gone from this dump".

Cal approached them. "We're leaving Bracca?"

"Possibly, the first clone replied.

The other added "Don't get his hopes up with second-hand gossip".

"Ha, it's okay. I'll believe it once Master Tapal says so".

"Speaking of your Master..."

"Oh, yeah", Cal had forgotten. "I better go".

Cal gave each trooper a high-five and resumed his way to the training room. Once he got there, he saw that his Master was in the control room in the upper level, accompanied by a Clone Commander.

“Master Tapal?” he called out.

Jaro turns around to face his apprentice. “Padawan, it’s time for instruction. Reach our position. And do not keep me waiting”. His Master always loved giving him a good challenge.

Several blocks detached from the ground and walls, just like in his past memories, forming a path to the upper level of the training room. To face it, Cal had to use all of his training: wall-running, climbing, double jumping. If that wasn’t enough for young Cal, the Clone Commander started shooting at him. Cal deflected them rather easily. “Whoa! Ha- cheap shot, Commander”. The trooper laughed.

“Focus”, Jaro Tapal said.

Cal made a final jump and joined his Master and Commander in the viewing deck.

“We will begin with physical preparation. First though, we have orders. Bracca is secure. We move out for Mygeeto shortly”.

So, it was true. Cal jumped with happiness. He knew that Bracca was filled with the Force as any other planet, but he had to admit that it was a total dump. “Yes!”

His Master gave him the moment. “You must...” he started saying when he suddenly stopped. He held his head in his hands and gasped as he felt ripples... no, tsunamis of loss, death, confusion throughout the stars.

The commander behind them was staring at his comms device, where a hologram of a hooded figure saying something Cal would only understand years later. “Execute Order 66”

Cal ignored it, even though he felt he shouldn’t. “Master? Are you okay?”

“Something is... wrong...” Even Cal, who was merely a Padawan, could still feel some of the ripples. What was happening?

Slowly, the clone behind them raised his blaster at Tapal. However, the Lasat ignited his lightsaber and cut him down.

“What’s happening? Why did the commander just...”

Jaro Tapal reached out a hand to silence Cal, clearly struggling with whatever he was sensing. “Padawan, something terrible is happening. The clones have betrayed us. There are no answers to your questions, not yet. We need to get off this ship. Quickly. Get to the escape pods. Use the maintenance halls”. He paused. “We trained for this, do you remember?”

“Yes Master. But, what about you?”

“I will create a distraction and meet you. If I am not there when you arrive, depart without me. I will find you on Bracca. Do you understand?”

Cal merely nodded. That, as he would learn moments after, was the first and last time Master Tapal had ever lied to him.

Outside, blaster shots could be heard. “They are coming”, Jaro Tapal opened the door that led to the maintenance halls. “I will seal the blast doors, but if any cross your path, do not hesitate. Go... And may the Force be with you”.

Cal sprinted out. Clones were waiting for him, blasters in hand and fingers on triggers.

“There he is! Shoot to kill”.

“No! Stop!” Cal shouted.

Nevertheless, the clones shot at him and Cal parried the blasts. Suddenly, the blast door closed. That had been his Master’s work. Cal yanked off a piece of a nearby wall and crawled into the maintenance shafts.

This doesn’t make any sense, what is going on? He climbed through the narrow passageways, catching fragments of clone conversations. They were still searching for both Jedi. That was good.

I don’t understand. What changed? Having almost reached the turbolift, Cal finally reached the reactor deck. Some clones had gotten there first. They had the high ground and began firing at him. This time, their blasters were not set to

stun. Cal sprinted to the turbolift – it was just a short way from its terminus to the escape pods.

“I have eyes on the small Padawan!” a voice said. Cal turned to see two clone troopers. “He’s in the turbolift”.

“Take him out! Then we go after Tapal”.

A storm of blaster fire rained down on Cal. He did his best to block it, but an errant bolt knocked his lightsaber from his hands. He leapt after it, but it rolled off the turbolift and down the reactor shaft. The weapon that was his life... gone forever. No time to get it back.

But before the clones could exploit this, Tapal emerged behind them, mercilessly cutting through his former comrades. “Padawan, your lightsaber!”

“I’m sorry, Master!”

“Keep climbing! I’ll meet you up ahead”, the Lasat shouted before turning and disappearing out of view.

He was good to his word. As Cal reached the top and began climbing through maintenance shafts, Tapal strode confidently beneath him, cutting swaths through the clones. He called up to his Padawan. “There is an override just ahead. You must activate it if we’re to escape”.

“Yes, Master”, Cal squeezed through the power cords and ventilation shafts and dropped down on a viewport area, just in time to see Tapal slaughter the boastful clones. His Master called to him without looking over.

“Move, Padawan! We have to leave now”.

Cal rushed over to the blastdoors, entering the escape pod deck. Two clones were waiting for him, and Cal instinctively reached for his lost lightsaber. Before the clones could punish him, however, Tapal strode in and struck them both down in a single blow. Cal began trying to simultaneously unlock the escape pod and close the blast doors into the escape pod deck. An entire squadron of troopers began advancing in, firing relentlessly. Jaro Tapal did his best to shield him from the barrage. “Cal, hurry!”

The storm of fire was just too much; several bolts hit the towering Lasat, and he dropped his lightsaber. "Master!"

Jaro Tapal locked eyes with his Padawan, then turned to the clones. Summoning the Force, he slammed as many clones as he could against the ceiling... but it wasn't enough.

And that's when Cal saw, for the first time, his Master like that... afraid, lost. He felt ripples of sadness coming off of him. Sadness that he had failed to protect his Padawan. But Cal was not yet dead. *Not yet.*

"NO!" In an explosion of Force power, Cal stretches out both his hands... and froze the entire clone squadron. However, one blast escaped the Force field created by Cal and hit him in the neck. That was going to leave a mark. He dragged his Master's body into the escape pod... and ejected the pod.

Cal rushed over to his Master's side. The dying Lasat was still clutching his lightsaber.

"Cal. Cal. I overloaded the ship's reactors", Tapal was clutching to his life as strong as he could. "The explosion will mask our escape. This... war is not over, my Padawan. Hold the line. Wait for the Council's signal..." Jaro Tapal gasped, and struggling, handed Cal his damaged lightsaber. "Remember... trust only... in the Force".

Cal sobbed. "Master..."

An explosion rocked the escape pod. The overloaded reactor had destroyed the *Venator* and, with it, the entire Clone Trooper legion. Cal screamed the air out of his lungs as the escape pod plummeted toward Bracca.

Cal awoke from his memory. The world around him was hazy... grey. Cold.

Jaro Tapal, his dead Master, left the shadows. Behind him, an ethereal mirror of the door tomb on Dathomir glowed ominously. "Padawan..." his Master said. "It is time for instruction". He ignited his lightsaber and Cal followed.

Tapal charged against his Padawan. "Your will is weak. You lack discipline. How can you still be afraid to fight?"

Cal dodged one of his blows and parried the other one.

"You let fear break your connection to the Force".

Cal yelled out in anger and struck down his own Master. Tapal didn't bother blocking the clumsy attack. Cal ran him through.

"Yes. My blood is on your hands, apprentice". He grasped Cal's hands in a strong grip. "You are a failure. A weakling. A traitor".

Cal couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Tapal got closer to Cal. "You... are no... Jedi!"

"No!" Cal backed off. As abruptly as he appeared, the phantasm vanished. Cal was alone, lightsaber outstretched, before the door to the inner sanctum of the tomb. He looked down at his lightsaber hilt. Sparks were flying from it.

Cal turned it over in his hand. "It's broken. The crystal... shattered. Useless". He then turned to BD. "Let's just get outta here".

BD was eager to do so. The two of them stepped out of the tomb, squinting in the red sunlight. A familiar figure greeted him.

"Did things not go as planned?" The wanderer asked him. "You can't say I didn't warn you".

Cal dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Leave me alone".

"Leave you? Alone? Lost... and defenseless in this dangerous place? Never".

He turned around to face the stranger. "Okay, enough of this. Who are you *really*?"

The wanderer paused, then removed his cloak. He was shirtless beneath, and into his flesh were carved sigils of distinctly Dathomirian origins. He raised his hands out to the side, as if to bask in Dathomir's scarlet sunlight. At his waist were two lightsabers. He introduced himself. "Taron

Malicos. Former Jedi". His voice was different. More confident, projecting power. "Like yourself. We have much in common".

Cal didn't like where it was heading. "I doubt that".

"Oh? We both survived the Purge. My troops betrayed me. I was forced to strike them down and I escaped. This", he chuckled "...desolate place. The darkness here. It almost took me. But I conquered it".

Cal finally understood. "You're the one the Nightbrothers follow".

Malicos laughed out loud. "Yes".

Cal glances at his waist. A series of Zabrak horns were collected on a piece of string hanging there, as a sort of twisted, dark decoration. "These savages only respect strength. And as we both know, the Force... is a most powerful ally".

Cal recognized the tone of the speech. But it was not from a Jedi. "No. No, you use the Force to seize power. That's... that's everything the Jedi stood against".

"These are dark times, kid. They will consume us if we do not stand with each other".

"I don't need your help".

"That broken lightsaber..." he gestured to Cal's belt. "Tells a different tale. You saw something in there. Didn't you?" He then pointed back toward the tomb. "Something terrible. There are many such places here on Dathomir. Join my family. And I can teach you how to control its power".

A familiar voice sounded in the air around them as a mist of green materialized in a feminine figure atop a stone column. "Join my family?" The Nightsister asked, rhetorically. "And I will teach you to control the power? Familiar words, Malicos".

"Sister Merrin", he said. So, that was her name. "You overstep your bounds".

"For years, you said that the Jedi orchestrated the massacre that killed my Sisters. Yet here one stands. And

you seek only to bring him into your family”.

“You were told to deal with it. Clearly you lack the power, little witch”, Malicos smiled at his own words.

“Power? You are mad, Malicos. Dathomir has unmade you. And my misplaced loyalty has allowed you to lead the Nightbrothers astray. Unlike the Jedi, the Nightsisters of Dathomir do not turn on their own kind. Our bond is eternal”.

With this last sentence, a deeper voice seemed to echo Merrin’s every word. Cal did not doubt that she was telling the truth. He was grateful that, for once, somebody else was facing her wrath instead.

“The Nightsisters are dead”, Malicos told her.

“Yes. Their graves are all around you”.

Cal looked around. Again, the truth – the strange pods were hanging everywhere around the entrance to the tomb. That didn’t sound good.

He turned to BD. “Time to go”. The little droid agreed.

Suddenly, Merrin started to chant something in Dathomirian “Choono slalem deni tay’lori olee-ay!” At the same time, green energy swirled around her, and then into the pods – no, graves – all around them. They began to open.

“Foolish girl”, Malicos roared. “This power is beyond your control!”

“You both shall learn”, Merrin said. “When you face one Nightsister of Dathomir, you face us all!”

All around them, corpses dropped from the graves and began to rise.

If Cal didn’t think it was within Malicos’s capabilities to sound reasonable, he was wrong. “Run”, he said to Cal.

The Padawan didn’t need anyone to tell him that twice. Cal broke into a sprint, back across the bridge, back through the ruins, desperately dodging the shambling corpses and reinvigorated Nightbrothers.

He called the *Mantis*. “Cere! Cere! Tell Greez to get the Mantis running!”

“What’s happening?”

“The Nightsister, she raised the dead! They’re after me!”

Greez had heard that too. He wasn’t happy. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, and you’re leading them HERE?!”

“Captain”, Cere said. “Prepare for takeoff”.

In time, Cal made it back to the ship. An errant Nightsister corpse was waiting for him there, but he dodged around it, climbed the ramp, and into safety. A few more witches were clambering onto the sides of the *Mantis*, more intent on breaking in than stopping Cal.

“Get us out of here!” Cal shouted to the bridge.

The *Mantis* rose into the atmosphere. “What did you do, kid? I got dead witches crawling all over my ship!”

“Just go! Just go”. The force of the take-off sent the witches flying off, toward a second, ignoble death. Cal slumped on the floor of the ship.

“What happened? Did you find the tomb?” Cere asked.

Cal couldn’t bring himself to speak, and he simply held up the ruined remains of Jaro Tapal’s lightsaber.

“Your Master’s lightsaber”, Cere’s voice was filled with sadness. She knew what that lightsaber meant to him.

“I saw him. Master Tapal, I... I saw the day he died. I saw what I did”.

“Cal...”

“Now it’s destroyed. And I couldn’t save him”.

“Cal, you were only a child”.

“No. No, I know I could have helped him if I’d been stronger and braver, if I would have listened to him. I could have helped him. I know it!”

Cere sat beside him on the floor. “Cal, it’s time I told you everything that happened to me when I escaped the Empire. They brought Trilla into the room. And when I saw her eyes... they showed me what I had caused. She was an Inquisitor. And something in me gave. And I lost all control.

And I tapped... into the dark side. And I killed them all. Every last one of them. Except for her. And for years... I couldn't forgive myself. I was a wreck. Because I had all this rage. And I tried pushing it down but there was no hiding from myself. And all I wanted to do was die. But then I learned about the holocron. A spark of hope that there could be a future. That we could move on". She got up and made Cal stand up too. "I can't change what I did no more than you can change what happened to your Master. It's in the past. But Cal, you have to make a choice to move on".

"How?" How could he move on from the fact that his Master had died from him? How could he move on from the fact that held himself accountable for that?

Cere pointed at his lightsaber. "You're going to start with this. You are going to build a new one".

Part Nine: Ilum

Chapter 26

ILUM

The *Mantis* travelled through hyperspace, deep toward the Unknown Regions and the ice planet of Ilum. There, Cal hoped that the Empire had not established enough of a foothold to make the trove of kyber crystals it holds inaccessible. Trying to pass the time, and to distract Greez from his unpleasantness of having undead dark side witches crawling all over his beloved ship, he decided to talk to the Latero. "So... seems like Sorc Tormo really wants a piece of you".

Greez chuckled "You don't know the half of it, kid".

"How'd you ever get involved with that guy?"

"Look, I didn't grow up with much. I mean, I had my great-grandmother to lean on, but that's it".

"You had to know it wouldn't end well with gangsters like the Haxion Brood", Cal said.

Greez shifted in his pilot's chair. "Cal, we ain't all Jedi. Most of us gotta scape by and occasionally, make some bets we wish we hadn't".

"I understand", Cal turned to look at his friend. "You can count on me if the Brood comes after you again".

"Yeah? Thanks, Cal".

Cal smiled. "Just wait until I have my lightsaber back".

Greez laughed. "Sure thing, kid".

The *Mantis* emerged from hyperspace just outside Ilum. The planet hadn't changed too much - it was still icy, still cold. But what was previously a largely uninhabited world, was now home to several mining operations that worked a large trench through the equator of the planet. That was new. Mercifully, however, there were no other ships in orbit, and whatever Imperial presence there was, it seemed to be

industrial rather than military. They landed without too much distraction, near where the Crystal Cave used to be – the site of an old Jedi ritual called the Gathering, where younglings crafted their first lightsaber. Greez surveyed the desolate landscape with his usual frown.

“A lightsaber? Here? I don’t get it... I don’t know how you’re gonna do it kid, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned about you, it’s that you always seem to get the job done”.

“That so...?”

“Well, I’d say that I’d bet my life on it but I already have... a lot”.

“Since you’re not the best gambler, Greez”, he chuckled “I don’t know if that’s good or bad”.

“Sure, sure. That’s – that’s true. But I still believe in what I bet and I’m letting it ride with you, Cal”.

“Thanks. I’ll try to get you to win”. Cal left the cockpit and walked toward the door of the ship.

Cere was already waiting for him. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. As you know, many Jedi have come to Ilum to find their kyber crystal”.

Cal looked fondly at the ice-covered surface. “I remember”.

“Master Yoda guided us to the entrance, but after that, we were on our own. Not something I wasn’t accustomed to, but that didn’t make it any less challenging”, Cere recalled.

“I was trained by following strict protocols. Prepared for everything... or so I thought”, he remembered his Master’s death at his arms.

“Maybe that was the lesson, Cal. You can’t know everything, you can only trust that you are able to handle whatever you face. You *will* be tested”.

“Yeah, but I’m ready”.

“I don’t mean just here. Every Jedi faces the dark side”. Cere reached behind her and drew out a lightsaber – probably the one she wielded before cutting herself off from the Force. “And it’s very easy to fail”.

Cal understood what she meant by that. "You're still struggling with the dark side. Even after cutting yourself off from the Force".

Cere turned her lightsaber hilt around in her fingers nervously. "We will always struggle. But that is the test. It's the choice to keep fighting that makes us who we are".

Cere extended her lightsaber to Cal. He took it, and looked down at his two weapons. One, with a broken crystal, and one with a broken master. He put both on his belt. "I guess it's about time I find out who I am. Thank you".

While on the other planets he had visited there was always some kind of fauna or flora trying to kill him, in Ilum, however, it was the planet itself. Nevertheless, in the middle of the empty, Cal could see a little light. Not a physical one, but one created because of his connection with the Force. Following it, he found his way to his destination.

"It's the Jedi Temple", Cal said to BD once they were inside the gathering room. That was the place where the Jedi Masters talked to the younglings before they ventured deep inside the caves searching for their crystals.

"Bee?"

"It's been a while, but yeah, I remember. Every Jedi comes here as a kid. Or, they did. When there were Jedi". Once, the room had been carefully structured such that the sunlight would melt the ice covering the door into the main chamber. Luckily, the windows and door were still intact, but the assorted reflective devices across the ceiling were out of place – the ice has not melted in a very long time. No sun shone on the central crystal hanging from the ceiling, which used to magnify the sun's rays enough to thaw the ice. The rest of the room looked like it had been ransacked, but mercifully, nothing had been completely destroyed beyond functionality.

"Trill be-beep!" BD said after seeing it.

"Yeah, it used to be beautiful. The warmth is nice, though", Cal let himself be bathed by the warm sunlight.

“Boo...”

“I remember this room. Master Yoda melted that door to let us into the caves”.

“Bo-beep?”

“No, not with the Force. With that crystal” he pointed at the hanging crystal. “The light passed through it and carried its warmth... I bet we can do it too”.

“Be-beep!”

Cal used his memory to rig the various reflective devices, eventually working them into a configuration such that the sunlight entered inside the room and onto the ice covering the door. It melt remarkably quickly, and Cal passed through into the Crystal Cave. Once inside, the pull was evident. The kyber crystals were not your usual minerals. They were attuned to the Force and resonated with it. Now deep in a cave filled with them, Cal could sense their ‘collective consciousnesses. It would be easy to just pick one and go, but the Force worked in mysterious ways. The Force guided the selection. That’s why lightsabers were so personal for the Jedi. So Cal let it.

The young Padawan immersed himself In the Force and travelled through the tunnels, searching for a crystal from which he could feel harmony within the Force. “I can feel it, it’s calling to me! We must be close”.

“Bo-boop?”

“Jedi can’t pick any kyber crystal. It chooses you”.

“Boo beep?”

“Yeah! Kinda like you”.

They worked their way deeper into the cave. As they did, a series of tremors began to shake the cave, knocking ice and snow off the walls. “Bo woop!” BD called.

“Just a little shake. It’ll be okay. The call’s getting stronger. Let’s hurry”.

Cal entered a large section of the cave. Immediately, he was almost drowned in Force echoes – thousands of Jedi who once passed through here. Now, as far as he knew,

there was only him and Cere. He still believed there had to be others, but he had to be prepared for the worst. "I feel like I'm surrounded by ghosts".

Suddenly, as they moved toward a side tunnel, an Imperial probe droid swooped down.

"It's them! How did they find us here?" Before it could open fire, Cal yanked it toward him with the Force, holding it tight, while BD-1 jumped on top of it and plugged directly into the droid's programming, erasing as many directives as the droid could manage. It was not a permanent fix - eventually, the Imperial probe droid's central processor would overcome the intrusion - but it was enough for Cal's purpose. The droid wandered off aimlessly, trying to figure out what it was doing. That meant they had to hurry.

They pressed on, and after going through an underwater tunnel heated by lava crystals, he came to yet another tunnel. The call of the crystal was almost a yell by now.

"It's through there. I can feel it. We're almost outta here. I promise". Cal began to squeeze through the tunnel, when suddenly the ice gave way beneath his feet. He barely caught himself on the edge. BD jumped off his shoulder, squealing in alarm. "BD! Don't come any closer".

His grip slipped as the ice melted from the warmth of his fingers, and he fell down into the darkness. "BD!"

Cal landed in a dark pool of water. He began to swim forward, looking for a way out. He reached the end, but exhaustion and oxygen deprivation had almost overcome him. He opened his eyes... and he saw a light. Inside that light, he noticed himself, years ago, reaching down to the pool.

"Trust me", his younger self reassured him. Cal reached out and grasped his hand. With a mighty pull, Cal was out of the freezing water and on top of ice. Cal looked ahead and saw his younger self walk toward a stalagmite, disappearing in the white light. Cal dragged himself after

him, and where the spirit had vanished... a kyber crystal was waiting.

Cal picked it up and smiled. He had done it. He looked at as the crystal resonated with the Force in such a familiar way. He was holding it in both hands when it split in half.

"No. No, no, no, no. No! It's over. It's over. I failed". He fell to the ground in despair, holding the broken crystal in a tight grip. He was freezing and lost inside the cave. It was over.

BD-1 had somehow found his way back to Cal and walked over to him. A soft voice began to play. It was Cordova's.

"Failure is not the end, my friend".

Cal pet the little droid's head affectionately. "That's good. That's good, buddy".

BD-1 walked away from Cal and emitted another hologram, but this time it was not just Eno Cordova in the recording. The Jedi Master was talking to a younger BD-1 in front of him.

"The time has come. This may be the last you see of me. I can sense the doom of the Jedi Order is upon us".

The BD in the recording beeped sadly.

"No, failure is not the end. It is a necessary part of the path. Hope will always survive in those who continue to fight. Like you, BD-1. I believe you will find someone just as brave and persistent as you have been. And you will help them, as you have helped me. But your memory will be completely lost. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Holo-BD thought for a moment and nodded.

"Only with a trusted connection will your memories be restored. I believe in you. As I always have. And I believe in who you choose to replace me". Cordova affectionately struck BD-1. "Goodbye... old friend".

The hologram ended and it was just him and BD again. Cal looked with deep appreciation at his friend.

"Your memories... you risked them for me?"

"Beep!"

“Yeah. I believe in you too, buddy”. He looked at the broken crystal. “Yeah, you’re right. There’s still a chance”. He held out the fragmented crystal, and moved over to a nearby table. “There’s always a chance”.

Cal set the two crystal fragments on the table, and then placed both Master Tapal’s and Cere’s lightsabers in front of him. He got to work.

When he was finished, he held up his masterpiece. On one end, the familiar emitter of Jaro Tapal. On the other, Master Cere’s lightsaber. He twisted the handle, and the double-bladed lightsaber came apart, with brilliant blue blades emitting from both ends. Cal spun each blade – the integrity and strength of the lightsaber was uncompromised, even with the fragmented crystal. He reattached the two lightsabers, and then sheaths the new weapon.

Cal made his way out of the Crystal Cave, making sure to displace the hanging crystal so that the entrance to the cave could be sealed again. No point in making the Imperial’s job easier. As he stepped outside, he gave his location to Greez to come pick him up. He had to go back to Dathomir. He had memories to face.

“You did it”, Cere said when Cal showed her the new lightsaber.

“We did. I wouldn’t be here without all of you”.

The ship rises up and into the atmosphere. Cal looked gratefully at his friends. “I used to sit on Bracca dreaming about storming Coruscant with survivors from the Jedi Council. Instead, the Order’s hopes rest on a gambler, a fallen Jedi, and a failed Padawan. A bunch of screw ups”.

“You can say that again!” Greez chuckled.

“BD’s the only reliable one!” Cal argued. “He let Cordova wipe his memories so he could stay behind and guide us. But you’re both willing to sacrifice everything; to keep going even when it seems impossible”.

“Failure is a part of the journey”, Cere added.

Cal nodded in agreement. "I get that now. Thank you. All of you".

As they reached out of the atmosphere, Cal went back to the holo-map. He highlighted the red planet.

"Dathomir, huh?" Cere asked.

"It's time I faced him", Cal admitted.

"Yes. You're ready to face your past".

"What about you and Trilla?"

Cere folded her arms. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready. You know what you need to start healing, and I'm so proud of you for that. I have my own path".

"I'm here for you if you need me", Cal smiled. *As I know you'll always be here if I need you.*

Part Ten: Back to Dathomir

Chapter 27

CONNECTIONS

When the *Mantis* left the blue ambience of the hyperspace and got illuminated by the red light of Dathomir's star, Greez started muttering to himself. "We'll be fine... we'll be fine..." he turned to Cal, wrapped in a warm blanket "Any bets on what horrible thing will happen this time? More dead things? Giant spiders? Killer plants?"

Cal smiled. "All of the above".

Greez shook his head. "Don't say that!"

Cere joined in the conversation. "Or maybe the Haxion Brood will come and find us".

Greez took his four hands to the air "Are you both still mad at me? The Greez guy?"

"Mad isn't the word I'd use".

"Gotta admit though, I paid you back in thrills. How many slubs get on the Haxion Brood's most wanted?"

"If you weren't such a good pilot, I'd hand you over myself", Cere said.

"Better keep your skills up, Greezy", Cal said. He was happy that all four of them were once again on good terms. After all, they were a team.

With the help of BD-1's holomap, it was easy enough to find the Zeffo tomb. As he climbed the steps to the final door, Cal took a deep breath. And then, he stepped inside and placed a hand on the locked door.

Jaro Tapal appeared before him once again.

"Master".

The Lasat approached Cal slowly. "You were wrong to return here unarmed".

Cal unclipped his new and upgraded lightsaber hilt. "Not unarmed".

The lightsaber didn't seem to have any effect on Jaro Tapal's face expression. "You think that lightsaber proves you a Jedi?"

Cal smiled. "No. Facing you... memories that have haunted me since Bracca... I won't run from them anymore". To prove his point, Cal kneeled in front of his former Master and placed the lightsaber in the ground beside him. He had a look of serenity in his face.

"Then let us see what manner of death your courage brings". He ignited his lightsaber, and charged.

The Lasat aimed his blade at Cal's head. Jaro let out a roar, bringing his lightsaber down on his Padawan. And it stopped, inches from Cal's face. Although he knew it was a vision, or a projection from the Force, Cal could still feel the heat emanating from the blade. He hadn't even flinched.

He looks up at his master. "Master. I will never forget. The loss has become a part of me. I will honor your teaching. And your sacrifice".

Jaro, struck by his Padawan's words, pulled his blade back, and stared at him for what felt like an eternity. Finally, he turned, and began to walk away. "Remember", he said. His voice was calm now. "Persistence reveals the path".

Cal returned to the top of the stairs in the real world and the doorway opened, giving him passage. As Cal made his way inside, a few Nightbrothers stood in his path, but their deaths gave Cal only one information: if they were here, Malicos was here too.

Cal paced around the room and realized that the architecture was pure Zeffo and, unlike the exterior, didn't incorporate any dathomirian element.

On the end of the room, there was a door to the inner chamber. Gripping his lightsaber tighter, Cal made his way inside, hoping that he would be ready to face whatever was lying ahead.

A few steps in and he senses a familiar presence. He turned around, lightsaber ready.

It was Merrin. "You chose to return", she said as she manifested herself out of thin air in front of him, with less of her usual ostentatious green mist than usual. She also had less jewelry and robes. She was... less menacing. "Brave... But not wise".

"Maybe", he turned his lightsaber off. "Merrin, right? I'm Cal Kestis. What you were told about the Jedi was not true".

"So you say... Cal. Malicos said many things too".

Cal knew that Malicos had been a bad influence for Merrin for who know how long, but at least she now seemed available to listen. "Taron Malicos might have been part of my Order, but what he is now, I... I have no idea".

The young Padawan decided to take a leap of faith and tossed his lightsaber to the Nightsister. "All I do know is having a lightsaber isn't what makes you a Jedi".

"Then what does?"

"We were peacekeepers", Cal explained. "We were betrayed by those we protected. Hunted down by the Empire. I... I might be one of the last of my kind".

Merrin ignited his lightsaber and raised it up, admiring the blue shimmer and humming.

"I was only a child when they attacked. An armored warrior brandishing this..." she nodded at the weapon in her hand "descended upon us, and cut down my people. My sisters. Until I was left alone... with the dead. Then Malicos came. And promised me revenge. If I shared our secrets with him in return".

"Whoo-whooooo", BD said, sadly.

Cal knew that was his chance and took a step forward. "I know what it's like to lose everything. And Malicos was wrong to use that against you. We don't have to be enemies".

Merrin looked at him for a while and then extinguished the blade. She tossed it back to Cal. "You will need this".

The Nightsister vanished in a puff of green light.

"There she goes again", Cal sighed.

“Booo-woop woop!”

However, Merrin’s disembodied voice still echoed through the room. “I’ll be watching”.

“Let’s get outta here”, Cal said to BD. The young Padawan started to make his way further down the tomb. Unlike the others, it was an almost straight line... Leading to an inevitable confrontation.

“Malicos lies ahead. You could turn back”, Merrin’s voice came from top of him. She was indeed watching.

“I can’t. Lives are at stake”.

“Whose lives?”

Cal recalled his moments in the Ilum Crystal Cave when he was but a youngling himself. “Innocents. Force-sensitive children who’ll be hunted down and murdered”.

“As we were”, Merrin says, a lump in her voice.

BD-1 scanned a nearby piece of the wall, and began playing a familiar voice recording. Cal was happy for the distraction from Merrin’s disembodied whispers. He did not think she was his enemy anymore, but her powers were unfamiliar and unsettling nonetheless.

“My friend, I have never been one to shy away from the pursuit of knowledge, but the shadow of the dark side lies heavy in this tomb. I’ve uncovered Kujet’s legacy: a ruthless leader who destroyed the Astriums and lives of any who opposed the sage’s rule. These Zeffo were once Kujet’s enemies, brave rebels who stood against tyranny. F... forgive me. I’ve spent too many rotations on this planet. My mind is beginning to slip. I can go no further. I must return to Zeffo”.

Cal sensed the truth in Cordova’s warning through the Force. The Force echoes he was sensing seemed more like a hurricane than a mere ripple in the Force. “Something terrible happened here... a massacre. They killed their own kind, for promises of power”. *Why did his situation feel so familiar?*

Chapter 28

DARK SECRETS

Cal finally reached his goal: a massive, red-lit chamber. In the center was a circular arena, and standing there, waiting for him: Taron Malicos. The former Jedi turned to face him, arms outstretched as if to embrace Cal. "Cal Kestis!"

"Malicos", Cal acknowledged him in a less solemn way.

"Welcome home. Here to begin your training?"

Cal did not answer.

"What in these ruins tempts you so much... to risk death?"

Behind the circular arena, on top of a vertical boulder, Merrin materialized. "I could ask you the same thing".

Taron gestured behind him. He was standing between Cal and the secrets of the tomb - and, possibly, the Astrium. "There is power there. Beyond Jedi understanding. Power I control. I would offer you the same thing".

Cal shook his head. "Don't you understand? I'm not interested in power". Malicos was so far gone that he couldn't even understand the meaning of such a sentence. "I want to restore the Order".

Malicos chuckled. "Restore the Jedi Order? Oh, you poor fool. It's over! Jedi fell long before the Purge. Stifled by tradition. Deafened by our past glories. Blinded by endless war".

"Maybe". Cal looked Malicos in the eyes. "But it's never over, Malicos. We stand here now with a chance to learn. To rebuild from our mistakes".

"Jedi learn?" he saw that as a joke. Indeed, he was no longer a Jedi. "There's no future for them. How can you not see that? It's time for something new. You and me. We could build something different. Something better".

"No".

Malicos face was now filled with rage and his darkness was felt all around him. "Then Dathomir will be your grave". He drew both his lightsabers from his belt and ignited them. They were crimson blood – hardly subtle. Cal drew his own, and faced the twisted former Jedi. Taron's blows were slow but powerful, like the Ninth Sister's, but each blow felt as if a dark presence was behind it, pushing Cal back down, and draining his vitality. He leapt in the air, and smashed his blades at Cal. Cal dodged at the nick of time.

"Dodging won't save you!" He shouted at the Padawan.

Cal lashed out and scored a glancing blow off Taron's shoulder. The pain from even a small lightsaber blow was overwhelming, but Taron scarcely seemed to notice it.

"That was nothing", he shrugged it off. Then, he sent out a pulse of Force power, knocking Cal back with ease, and then pressed his attack. "Only cowards run!" He charged against Cal but the Padawan was able to parry the attack.

Suddenly, Malicos sheathed his lightsaber and caught Cal in a Force grip, lifting him up off the ground, almost completely unable to move.

"I was wrong to think you could stand with me!" He slammed Cal onto the stone floor, and yanked a piece of the wall off. It hovered over Cal's head. "Die, welp!"

A blast of green energy disintegrated the rock before it could crash down. "You have no right to Dathomir. No right to our magick", Merrin shouted. She unleashed a barrage of green energy blasts, but Taron blocked them. He retaliated, throwing one of his lightsabers at the pillar she was balanced on, and then yanking it toward him. The pillar collapsed, but Merrin landed nimbly onto the arena.

"Get up, Cal Kestis", she said. "You're not dead yet".

Cal rose, and reengaged the former Jedi. Their duel was intense, but Merrin manifested – seemingly at random – around the edge of the arena, unleashing barrages of green energy each time she did so. Each barrage gave Cal a moment's respite, while Taron, despite the dark forces

sustaining him, began to tire. Eventually, Taron fell to the ground, his lightsaber skidding away with him. He pulled his arm back, preparing to unleash a deluge of Force power, but it froze in place. Merrin appeared again, green energy coursing around her, and strode angrily toward Taron. Whatever strange magick Merrin commanded, it began to envelope Taron.

"What is this?" he cried.

"It's like you said, Malicos", she answered. "Dathomir will be your grave".

In a burst of energy, the ground beneath Taron rose and engulfed him, dragging him down. He twisted and screamed in defiance, but weakened and tired as he was, resistance was futile. After a moment, he was gone.

"Let him lie in the dark with his secrets. Until death takes him", Merrin finally said.

"Why'd you help me?" Cal approached her after asking BD for a healing stim.

She turned to him. "To rid Dathomir of that parasite. What are you *really* doing here, Cal Kestis?"

Cal gestured around the tomb. "The ones who built this tomb, the Zeffo, they created an object called the Astrium. It opens a Vault on a distant planet. Inside is a list of Force-sensitive children across the galaxy, but the Empire is looking for it too".

Merrin was confused. "What empire?"

"*The* Empire. The one bent on exterminating Force-sensitives so no one can stand against it?" She had lived in isolation for so long, that she didn't even know what the Empire was...

"Then it will come for Dathomir before long, as the war did. I will help you find this Astrium".

"Thank you", Cal said. "And thank you for helping me with Malicos. Thought I was a goner for a minute".

"Yes, you would have died", she said.

Cal sucked in dry. "Right..."

But then she added. "I am glad you didn't. It is nice to have an ally".

Cal nodded. "Yeah, I like the sound of that".

"You're welcome, Cal. Now, you should get what you came for".

Cal turned around from the arena and moved deeper into the tomb. To his surprise, Merrin didn't actually walk with him, but instead... her voice floated along.

"This place, it's..."

"Horrifying", she completed.

But no more obstacles stood in his way. At the end of an enormous hallway was a small glowing blue orb embedded in the wall. It came out easily. At last, the Astrium. "We finally found it", he told BD.

Merrin was waiting behind him. "So, it is real".

Cal was excited. "Merrin, this could be the key to the next generation of Jedi".

Merrin took Cal's hands for a moment, then Astrium, and turned it over. She looked... lost. She then added, drily. "I'm happy for you. And... your Jedi". She handed him back the Astrium. "But nothing can bring back my people".

"Yeah..." he sighed.

Merrin turned around and walked away.

"After the Purge..." Cal said out loud. "I was alone for a... a long time".

The Nightsister stopped to listen.

"In hiding, I was... I was scared that they'd find out who I was or... *what* I was".

"What changed?" she asked, turning to face him.

"A very good friend of mine told me to go out and find my place in the galaxy".

"And you listened".

Cal shook his head and Prauf appeared in his mind. He smiled at the memory of his friend. "Well, no, but life has this funny way of forcing you on the path forward anyway. Now here I am. Where I least expected".

Merrin nodded. "A path forward. I will join you".

Cal was not sure he heard her correctly. "You will?"

She nodded again. "I've spent years... waiting for a chance to avenge my sisters. I'm finished waiting. I wish to fight by your side. Nightsisters and Jedi do not travel together but... Survivors. We adapt".

Cal chuckled. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess we do. What do you think, BD?"

"Woop!"

"I agree", Cal said and extended his hand. Merrin took it and they shook hands, smiling at each other. "My crew, they might take a little bit of convincing, though".

"Then we'll convince them", she said.

BD beeped in agreement. He liked her confidence.

As Cal walked back to the ship, Merrin assumed the role of an incorporeal voice, once again.

"This woman you travel with, who is she?" she asked.

"Cere?! Wait, how do you know about her?" Cal was confused now.

"I have seen your companions", Merrin revealed. "Malicos wanted me to attack them, but they posed no threat".

"Cere... well, she used to be a Jedi. It's a long story".

"I would like to learn it. I'll meet you at your ship".

Chapter 29

NEW ALLIES

The young Padawan and the Nightsister walk into the Mantis, the former holding out the Astrium proudly.

Cere was the first to greet them. "You found it".

Greez, however, pointed at Merrin, scared "Woah, woah, who's this?"

"Bee-woop! Beep boo-beep!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Greez asked, two cups in his lower hands.

"It means I'll be joining you", Merrin assumed that it was what the droid had just said.

Cal made the introductions. "Cere, Greez, this is Merrin".

"Wha - she's a witch, isn't she?"

"A Nightsister", Merrin explained. She then added. "Your fear is unnecessary".

"I couldn't have found the Astrium without her. We fought Malicos together. I trust her", Cal reassured them.

Cere looked between him and Merrin. "And we trust you. You..." her stare stopped at the newcomer, "will have to earn it".

"Okay, fine", Greez finally said. "Grab some seat. Long as she doesn't try anything funny".

Cere smiled. "Welcome aboard".

Greez and Cere headed to the cockpit. Cal turned to Merrin. "They like you".

Merrin smiled and Cal walked to the holo-table, while she took a seat, and BD-1 trotted up to her.

"Be-be-beeeeep!"

"I don't know what you're saying", she frowned at the little droid.

"Woooo...."

Meanwhile, Cal calculated a route to Bogano. It was time to return to the Vault. From the bridge, he heard Greez comment "This Cordova guy is really putting some wear and tear on my ship".

Cere laughed. "He always wanted to explore the whole galaxy".

"And did you?" Cal asked.

"We explored many planets. Tombs and temples related to the Zeffo and Jedi. But I hit a limit. To him, there was no limit".

"The poor crazy old guy was left alone", Greez said.

"He was always alone. Even when I was with him. He cared about his work and the future more than anything else; he didn't have the time. He was always on the move. Bogano is the first place I ever saw that looked like he settled... even for a brief moment".

Cal nodded. And now, at last, they were going to walk the last of Cordova's path.

Part Eleven: The Finish Line

Chapter 30

THE VAULT

Cal had been looking at the Astrium for a while now. "You think it'll work?"

Cere, who was right by his side, said. "It worked for Cordova".

"You can make it work", Merrin added.

"She's right", Cere said before Greez walked in.

"Oh, hey, is anybody hungry? I was thinking of whipping up some scazz steaks". All the other four crewmembers stared at him. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting?"

"No, Captain", Cere smiled. "And, we couldn't have gotten this without you".

Greez wasn't very good at taking compliments. "Uh... Well, I..." he tried to say something, while looking at the ground.

"It's true, Greez", Cal said.

"Thank you. Hey, I hope you get in there and you find that holo-thingy".

"Holocron", he said after Greez.

Merrin waited for Greez to leave before asking. "Are you sure it's something you should find?"

Cal stared at her, not knowing what to say. "What... what do you mean?"

"The children on that list... If you take them from their homes to train as Jedi... Won't they be hunted like you?"

Cal thought about her words for a moment. "It has to be kept out of the hands of the Empire".

Cere chimed in. "It'll help us put an end to the Empire".

Suddenly, an alarm started blazing. Greez walked back in. "Oh, hey, uh, change of plans. We're arriving". But he stopped when Merrin called him. He swallowed in dry. "Yeah?"

"I take my steak rare", she said.

He sighed in clear relief. "Uh, eh..." he chuckled. "Okay, now we're cookin'!"

The *Mantis* landed on the peaceful planet of Bogano.

Grabbing the Astrium from the table, Cal got up and went to the door.

"Hey! Uh... wait up", Greez said. "I know you're about to get that holo... cron".

"Nice, you remembered. You joining me?"

Greez chuckled. "Oh, no absolutely not. I just wanted to say, you know... those kids we're supposed to find, they're lucky to have you".

"They're lucky to have us. We're in this together, Greez".

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping you'd say that because, you know, they're gonna need more than fancy magic tricks".

"Oh yeah", Cal smiled.

"You know, flying a ship is a complicated art... but that's only if I stick around".

"I'll remember that".

"Good", Greez placed his lower hands on his hips. "Okay, good luck buddy".

Cal smiled and went to talk to Merrin. There was something about her face. "Hey, you holding up okay?"

"Yes, but... there's something weird about this place. The energy is different here".

"It's quite different from Dathomir", Cal agreed.

"Yes, Dathomir is intricate; its ancient power emanates from the shadows. Bogano... feels more simplistic and yet... I can't figure it out".

"Bogano is special", Cal told her. "There's a reason the Zeffo built their Vault here".

"Where your holocron waits, hidden?"

"What are you getting at?"

"This planet has remained nearly untouched for centuries. Were the lives you seek to protect really in danger before

you intervened?”

That's a really good question, Cal thought as he took off to the Vault. He didn't have too much time to think, since he had BD's map and his new abilities to help him. Once at the Vault, he stopped and thought for a moment about what he was about to do. He could feel a pull to get him inside the Vault. It was strong. He knew the Empire and the Inquisitors were working to get the holocron. Which meant that getting it first was not in question. He *had* to do it. The real question was: what would he do *after* having the holocron? He remembered his last encounter with the Second Sister – he would have to think about it later.

Cal entered the Vault and walked inside the main room. He went immediately to the familiar slab of stone and placed the Astrium in the cavity he had noticed the first time. The room started shaking as gears came into life. The whole Vault started moving as if it was built as a giant holocron. One of the circular golden hemispheres slid open, revealing a black glassy material. That wall was pulling Cal.

Something about that wall... he thought.

His reflection was fuzzy and... weird. He placed a hand on it, his reflection following his movements. The Force echo, was powerful. Cal struggled against it. It was powerful, but part of him wanted to embrace it. What looked like centuries was faster than a blink of an eye because, when he opened his eyes again, he was somewhere completely different. He was inside a dark cave, surrounded by several Zeffo statues. A voice sounded over him. Cal assumed it belonged to the Zeffo sage in the end of the cave. “I offer this record of our civilization to those who will follow. Despite our wisdom and technological achievement, we face extinction. Dogma blinded us to the path of balance and gradually, we allowed our pride to corrupt us.

“The greater the control we sought, the further we fell into ruin. I lead the remnants of my people into the great

unknown, hoping that we will finally find peace". With that, the sage disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Right immediately, Cal saw himself. Not his younger version as a youngling. It was *him*. He was surrounded by children, all eager to learn.

"Gather around everyone", his shadow self said. "Today, we'll learn about the Force".

"What is the Force?" asked one of the children.

Another stepped in. "Master Kestis, do you think the Empire will find us?"

Cal eyes the illusion with both interest and worry, but then there was no illusion. It was gone. Slowly and with caution, Cal kept going.

Suddenly, he began hearing voices and the cave, that was once dark, began turning red, like blood. Children were shouting. "It's the Empire. The Inquisitors found us". Corpses began piling up. Cal didn't know what to do. Part of him knew that wasn't real, while the other... the other knew that the blood on the floor was on him. All of it.

Stormtroopers ran around shooting his future students. Purge Troopers grabbed them by their hair, carrying them to the side, only to be met with a painful end by a red blade... he stared at it. Holding the blade was an Inquisitor, but not the Second Sister... no, it was someone else, someone familiar. The blade deactivated and Cal could finally see who the one behind the darkness was.

"Hello there... me", another Cal said, yellow eyes blazing with rage, while dressed in a black armor with an imperial insignia. "You like what you see?"

"NO!" Cal shouted as he took two steps back, tripped and fell on the wet floor of the Vault. He was back inside the main room, with his normal clothes and BD by his side. He took a deep breath. *No...*

He got up and looked at the dark glass. It seemed in fear of what might happen, he had shattered it. He took a deep breath and went back to the slab. Above it, hovering, was a

holocron. *The* holocron. As he moved to grab it, a lightsaber activated behind it. Cal already knew who it was. The cold feeling was all over him once again.

"I had a bad feeling I'd see you here", he turned around to face Trilla.

"Oh, How uncharacteristically prescient of you", she said, a smile on her voice. She paced in front of him and Cal noticed that she was no longer using her mask. "Here I thought your greatest virtue was your dogged persistence as you stumble from one debacle to the next".

Cal, however, stood still, protecting the holocron. "Guess you made a mistake not killing me on Bracca then".

"A scant mercy", she corrected him. "I wagered one meaningless Padawan against a prize that will win me the Emperor's favor". She was getting more and more impatient.

"You think I'm gonna let you walk away with the holocron?"

She stopped walking and gazed at Cal. "Of course not. We both have our pride. But yours has cost you the lives of the Force-sensitive children on that list, as well as your own".

Cal, at last, ignited his lightsaber. "Like you said, Trilla", he went back to the stance he had learned many years ago with his Master Tapal "I'm persistent".

Their fight began like the other two. Trilla underestimated Cal, but he had learned so much since then. Most of her attacks failed and, while her power was fueled by rage, his was fueled by the hope of saving all the children in that list. There was nothing that Trilla could throw at Cal that might waver his persistence. Nevertheless, Trilla was still a formidable opponent. He had to find a way to take her lightsaber away from her.

Cal charged against the Inquisitor. As he had planned, she dodged. Using her opening, he fainted a trip and she directed his lightsaber at him. He went back to his initial stance and locked blades with her enemy. Through her

eyes, he knew that she hadn't realized what he was planning. Keen on not wasting any more time, Cal forced her blade, expecting her to push his saber back. After a few seconds, he turned his lightsaber off and took a step back. Trilla lost her balance and lunged forward. Cal reached out to the Force to hold her in the air and to throw her to the other side of the room. She dropped her lightsaber in the fall. Before she could grab it again, Cal picked up her double lightsaber and then stopped. The ripples of the Force around it were immensely strong and... dark.

Trilla got up slowly, savoring the moment. With the Force, she pulled the holocron to herself and smiled at Cal. "Careful with that thing". Cal fell on his knees, pain flowing through his whole body. "It's been through hell". Taking her chance, Trilla left the Vault.

Meanwhile, Cal was left alone with her nightmares. The first image was of a Rodian youngling, scared and cold, inside a cave. Trilla held them in her arms, reassuring them. Cere, in her Jedi robes, stepped inside the cave where they were hiding. "Don't go. We need to stick together", Trilla told her. Outside, blaster sounds could be heard.

Cere shook her head. "No. I'm going to lure them away and then I'm going to circle back. Stick with the younglings, Trilla. And may the Force be with you". Cere left the cave running.

"Master, don't leave us!"

The Rodian grabbed Trilla even more tightly. "Trilla, what's going to happen?"

"It's okay", she lied. Lying was the only thing she could do. "It's okay".

Cal already knew the story, but he couldn't stop it from playing in his head. The next scene was inside an Imperial complex. Two stormtroopers stood guard in front of Trilla, who, despite her situation, was more worried about the younglings than herself. That changed when the place she

was being held turned out to be a torture chamber. Cal couldn't see much, but the cries of pain and agony filled his head.

The next scene wasn't any better. Trilla was outside of the torture chair. It was currently occupied by Cere. Next to Trilla, a stormtrooper handed her a helmet - her Inquisitor helmet. Cere, watching that, shouted and reached out to the Force - the dark side. Everything in the room was thrown aside by a powerful push. Cal saw the torture chair destroying and Cere running away from the torture room. After that, he found himself in the Vault. He took two deep breaths and sheathed the lightsabers. Trilla had the holocron and he needed it back.

Chapter 31

THE INQUISITORIUS

When Cal made his way back to the *Mantis*, he faced one of his worst fears. The Empire had found their way to Bogano. Maybe Merrin was right. Maybe them trying to intervene had made things worse. But that didn't matter. Not now. They had to get the holocron back... or die trying.

Trying not to pick a fight with anyone, he sneaked back to the ship.

"Cere", he said as he entered. She stepped forward as locked her gaze with Trilla's saber. "I saw what happened. Between you and Trilla. What you both went through... I'm... I'm so sorry".

She frowned but he continued. "I was arrogant, I was foolish. I could never understand what you went through". Since Cere remained speechless, Cal moved on. "She has the holocron. I don't know where she's taking it".

"I'm responsible for the path that Trilla is on", she finally spoke. "And what she does next is the cost of all my mistakes".

"Our mistakes..." Cal sat next to her, "are in the past. And it's all of our responsibility and it's about what we do next that's important. *You* taught me that, Cere".

She reflected and nodded. "You're right. I know where she's taking it. Uh... There's a fortress, where they take Jedi. Where the Inquisitors come from. It's a place of torture", her face was filled with pain. The same pain Cal had seen from Trilla's memories. "It's the place I escaped. Just never thought I'd be going back there".

"This time, you won't be going alone. You'll have a friend with you", he smiled.

She smiled, but shook her head. "No", she got up and stood in front of Cal. "I'll have a Jedi with me". For the first time in many years, she let herself reach out to the Force and pulled Trilla lightsaber to her hand and ignited it. She stared at the red blade but ignored it.

"Kneel", she told Cal. Reluctantly, he did as he was told. "By the will of the Council", she hovered the lightsaber over Cal's right shoulder. "By the will of the Force", she placed it over his left shoulder. "Cal Kestis", the saber was not above his head. She deactivated the saber. "Rise, Jedi Knight". They gazed at each other for a few seconds. "You are ready".

"So are you", he replied.

She walked away from him to the holo-table. There, she introduced the coordinates for Nur – a water moon located in the Mustafar System in the Outer Rim. Greez punched in the calculations necessary to make the Jump to hyperspace.

Here we go... Cal thought.

*

The *Mantis* and her crew were hurtling through hyperspace toward the Fortress of the Inquisitorius itself. Therefore, there was a lot of tension in the air.

As always, Greez was the one to break the silence. "Cal, I need you to hear this..."

"What's this all about, Greez?" he asked.

"Now, I understand that there's more of us on the *Mantis* than originally expected, so I'll go easy on you... There was a problem with the refresher. Now, I'm not saying I know who it is, and after that smell, I don't think I want to. I just want to ask you all to please light a candle or something".

"Easy enough", Cere agreed.

"Do you have a gundark's blood candle?" Merrin asked.

"Do I? No, no I've got wasaka berry. Look, the point is Lateros have a keen sense of smell, that's why I'm such a

good cook. So, if it happens again, I'll throw the culprit off the ship myself..."

Shortly after, the *Mantis* emerged from hyperspace around a dark blue planet. Multiple Star Destroyers were in orbit around it, and unlike on Kashyyyk, there was nothing to distract them on the ground. Staying well out of their sensor's range, the entire crew gathered around to plot their approach.

"This isn't good", Greez commented. "With the defenses they got our usual tricks just aren't gonna cut it".

"I can help".

Cere nodded. "What are you thinking?"

"A ritual", she explained. "It will hide the ship. I hope".

Greez was in disbelief. "A ritual", he muttered under his breath.

"She has a knack for this kind of stuff", Cal told them.

"Wha... hold, wait a minute. Now... what is this gonna require?"

"A sacrifice", she said, with a straight face. "One of your arms will do nicely".

The Latero took a step back. "Wait, what?"

Merrin slapped him in his shoulder playfully. "Don't be so serious. Join me up front".

Sense of humor, Cal thought. *That's new.*

Merrin headed into the cockpit, and began the ritual as their ship crawled toward the Imperial fleet. And beyond it: the Inquisitorius Fortress. "Sisters... Mother... lend me your strength. Sisters. Mother. Lend me your strength", she repeated, her voice more and more determined. She materialized a cracked fragment of... something on her hands. It was a Dathomirian artifact of some kind. Green energy began to flow out of it and around the ship.

"Whatever she's doing, it's working", Greez said, checking the scanners. They hadn't been detected so far.

"What do you think the odds are?" Cal asked, sitting in his chair.

The pilot smiles at Cal. "My money's on you, kid".

Cal smiles back and turned to Merrin, but she was deep in concentration. Instead, he turned to BD. "Let's go, buddy". They headed down to the door of the ship, where Cere was already making preparations.

"Once we're inside I'll engage their defense level. And then sabotage their sensors so the *Mantis* can extract us. You find the holocron".

"Shouldn't we stick together?" Cal asked.

Cere shook her head. "I feel the pull... the lives of every child on that list are at stake. Whatever happens in there and whatever you see... don't worry about me. Just get in and get out".

Greez shouted from the bridge. "Closing on the Fortress".

"It's time", Cere told him.

They both step into an escape pod each. After a moment, it ejected, and they were blast toward the surface. The escape pod crashed into the ocean. As they had hoped, the Fortress extended well underwater. Donning the breather he had used in the Shadowlands, Cal made his way toward the outer defenses and into an airlock. He was in the Fortress Inquisitorius.

Cal swam to the surface and he could already hear several stormtroopers communicating with one another.

"Airlock 8 is clear", one of them said.

Cal burst out of the water and threw his lightsaber, immediately killing two of the stormtroopers that were on top of the metal platform. He pulled it back to him, froze the other two in place, and then cut them down.

Over the comms, Cal heard Cere. "Cal, you there?"

"Yeah. Good to hear your voice, Cere".

"I've located the holocron", she said. "Sending you the location now".

BD beeped, accusing the reception of the information.

"Got it", Cal told her. "We're on the move". Cal opened the blast door in front of him and stepped inside.

Unlike the many other Imperial bases and settlements Cal had seen during this journey, this place was unusually crawling with stormtroopers and Purge Troopers. This time, however, no matter how organized they were, they were spread apart and completely unprepared for an attack in their own turf. Yes... the *Mantis's* crew was that crazy.

Trying to remain secret was long as he could, Cal slipped through the shadows, only engaging with the enemy when it was absolutely necessary. Finally, Cal arrived at a control room, and began rerouting power, letting the Force guide him as much as the knowledge he had picked up on Bracca. Through the underwater viewport, a hallway several stories up exploded. "Whoa, see that BD?"

A moment later, the power generator he was rerouting also sizzled out.

"Bwoo boop..."

"Yeah, that did something. Let's check it out".

Before they could figure it out, however, Cere called them. "I've disabled the shields on the outer sections of the Fortress. Flood the base and swim to the central keep".

"That's a hell of a plan", Cal smiled.

"We'll meet up inside, then. Good luck".

"Got it. Let's go, BD", Cal motioned for BD to get back on top of his shoulder. "Beep! Beep!"

The final stretch toward the inner Fortress was much more difficult. After swimming through the rest of the base of the Fortress, Cal found yet more Purge Troopers. These were way better trained than the ones Cal had fought and killed in Zeffo, Kashyyyk and Dathomir. When Cal was finished, he turned off his lightsaber and took a healing stim from BD. "That's the last of them", he muttered under his breath.

Cere called him again once he was on the prison block. "Cal, I'm near your position but sealed behind a blast door. Look for a console nearby".

It didn't take Cal long to find the control monitor. BD helped him open the blast door. Cere strode out, Inquisitor

lightsaber in one hand and blaster in the other. She swiftly disposes of two Purge troopers on the other side. From the viewing port, Cal watched in amazement. As fast and as strong as he had become, Cere looked like she'd barely missed a day of training in the last five years – which was insane, as she hadn't trained even once. "That was... impressive. How are you holding up?"

"Don't worry about me", she said, looking at him, "we have a job to do. Still... it feels good to tear this place apart. This prison is where they kept us. I only wish there was someone left to save".

"I'm sorry we had to come back here".

"So am I but... we didn't really have a choice, did we?"

We did... except I messed everything up, Cal thought. "I understand. Let's keep moving".

"Yes," she forced a smile "let's get this over with".

"Any sign of Trilla?" Cal thought.

She shook her head. "No, not yet. The holocron is being kept in the interrogation chamber. It's the most secure place in this entire Fortress. I'm opening the path to the holocron". She told this as she touched the control monitor from her side of the viewing port. "Get to the holocron. I'll divert the reinforcements and join you as soon as I can".

Cal nodded and left the prison block, reaching a massive chasm, with red, volcanic, smoke rising from the bottom. There was a small tower in the center – it reminded Cal of the inner sanctums of the Zeffo tombs. Fiddling with a control panel was all it took to extend a bridge across the pit. Cautiously, his lightsaber in a tight grasp, he crossed it to the other side. "We're getting close. Hey BD-1?"

"Boop?"

"Thanks for being my friend", Cal said.

BD jumped on his little legs. "Boo-woop!"

Outside the door, Cal took a moment to examine the various computer and security systems set up. "I've never seen anything like this", he said. "Advanced, even for the

Empire". He opened himself to the Force and realized that the need for such advanced security was obvious. This was it - the interrogation chamber. He could almost hear the screams of pain and suffering coming from inside. Except everything was silence at the moment. "They broke them, beat them down, and turned them to the dark side".

BD sliced the controls, and the door opened at once. Right before them, was the chair from Cal's visions. From Trilla's memories. Where the Empire had broken her and where Cere almost turned to the dark side. He didn't need to have affinity to feel ripples on the Force to sense the cold coming from that chair.

With a shout, Trilla descended from above him, seeking to end his journey with one fell blow. Cal stepped back in time and ignited his lightsaber to block Trilla's. This time, Trilla didn't toy with him. This time, she didn't underestimate him. With a Force push, she sent him flying backward. Also gone, were her distracting banter, her scheming and manipulative words. Trilla had come with a single, clear, purpose: to kill Cal Kestis. Cal knew that he either killed her, or he could get her attention. Not the Second Sister's, but Trilla's. Meanwhile, he had to parry and dodge her attacks... trying to tire her. After a while, he released his own blast of Force energy. Trilla stumbled, but did not fall. The dark side rolled off her in waves. All he could feel inside her was hate. Anger. And fear. Eating her alive. Feeding off of her.

However, there was no room for fear in Cal Kestis' mind. After all, he *was* a Jedi Knight. They locked blades. Sparks flew, but neither of them gave up an inch. "Trilla. I saw what you've been through. You've experienced great suffering. It's not too late to let it go".

"Let go?" she stared deep at his eyes. There was fire in her eyes. More than ever now. "I'm stronger now because of the pain".

She broke the deadlock, and held out the holocron in her off-hand. "I knew you'd come back for this... No thank you? You'll never make it out of this place alive". With that, she dropped a small metal ball onto the ground and it emitted a burst of white light. Cal could not see. But if there was something Master Tapal always taught him was that a Jedi didn't need their eyes to see. The Force was his eyes.

"Know your place", Trilla said, attacking him. But he blocked her attacks "You can't win!" she shouted. She lunged forward a final time, but it was a desperate, angry blow.

Cal knocked it off to the side, and moved with impossible speed, lightsaber at the ready. It was more than a glancing blow, but not a fatal one as his lightsaber skimmed along her shoulder. Trilla cried out in pain and fell to the floor. Relieved for that having worked, Cal summoned the holocron to his hand and turned off his lightsaber.

"Cal!" Cere called from behind. She ran up to him and her former Padawan, kneeling helplessly in front of them.

"I have the holocron", he told her.

"I need to do this", she said slowly, years of pain weighing on her voice. Cal nodded, stepped aside and Cere walked toward Trilla. "It's over, Trilla".

"Nothing is ever truly over", the Inquisitor said.

"This fight is over. I know the darkness that is eating you up inside and every day we choose to either feed it... or fight it".

Trilla cried. "It's too late, Cere".

"No", she knelt next to Trilla. "It's not. I know the choices that I made took all your choices away. And I have failed you, Trilla". She looked Trilla in the eyes. "I failed you. And I am so very sorry".

Trilla struggled to her feet and Cere followed her. "I've carried so much hate for you". Behind her, smoke began to rise from the torture area behind her. There was a loud thump, as something landed. A moment of silence that

stretched an eternity, and then a heavy, mechanical breathing followed by steps as a dark shadow emerges from the smoke.

Cal looked at Trilla who was shivering in fear and then he realized he was chattering his teeth. It was as if the dark side of the Force itself was emerging in front of them, materialized in black. "That doesn't look good", he said to Cere.

"It isn't. It's him", she didn't take her eyes off the shadow.

The dark figure jumped down onto the platform, behind Trilla. Cere and Cal ignited their lightsabers. "You have failed me, Inquisitor", the man or machine said through the black mask.

"Avenge us", Trilla managed to say before the dark figure's crimson blade swept effortlessly through her, killing her in one blow.

"Cal..." Cere said. "Run!" Cere leapt through the air toward the Dark Lord of the Sith. With a flick of his hand, he sent her flying past him and over the edge of the platform.

"No! Cere..." Cal stared at the chasm. It couldn't be... She couldn't be... *No...*

"You would be wise to surrender", the dark man said slowly.

"Yeah", Cal nodded. *That would be wise indeed.* Cal raised his lightsaber defiantly. He knew it was hopeless - from this man there is only one thing: Power. "Probably". Cal charged forward.

Vader, however, didn't bother to entertain the young Jedi. He extended his hand, and Cal froze in place, his entire body jerking as the dark side clutched at his throat. "Submit".

Desperately, Cal reached for an exhaust pipe behind Vader and pulled it toward them with the Force. Vader, who didn't even look at it, extended his other hand to catch it, and threw Cal down the hallway, disgusted. The pipe flew

toward him, bouncing just over his head. BD-1 tried to close the door, but it buckled, then crumpled. The panels of the bridge began to lift up and fly at Cal. "We gotta run!"

"Beep boop!"

Cal sprinted down the bridge and into an elevator, fumbling desperately with the controls. The doors were unresponsive, as if something was holding them back. "Come on!" He looked up. Vader strode slowly toward him. He knew Cal couldn't escape. Cal knew it too, but he wasn't going to wait to figure out what happened if he didn't try. "BD, stay back!"

The blast door shut in time, but immediately a red lightsaber pushed through it, slicing a way in. Off-balance and shaken. This was unlike anything he had ever faced. He looked around desperately, but just as the door was about to give way, the elevator started to rise. Once it opened, Cal ran away from it. "I think we lost him".

"Boo..."

"We'll make it. Cere... I won't fail you", he said more to himself than to the droid.

The comms turned on suddenly. "Kid, you read me? They're not responding!" It was Greez.

Merrin was with him. "They will. I am certain of it".

"Greez, I'm here! Heading towards the surface. Be ready. I have the holocron, but Cere... she didn't make it, Greez".

"Cere? Just come back to the ship".

Cal hurriedly opened a blast door, and the dark shadow was already waiting for him. Vader brought down his lightsaber, and Cal barely parried in time. The blow sent him reeling back and a second knocked him to the ground. He was a force of nature. Cal steadied himself just in time to block the third blow. Darth Vader pressed his lightsaber down inexorably toward the newly-anointed Jedi Knight. BD-1 scurried off of Cal's shoulder and onto Vader's. Since Vader was more machine than man, the courageous little droid sent a burst of electrical energy coursing through the

Sith Lord's suit. Vader let out a grunt of exertion and grabbed the droid in his hands, preparing to stomp out the irritation. Cal took the opportunity and lunged forward. Vader turned, but Cal was rewarded with the smallest of blows. Sparks flew from the side of his suit, but as a punishment, Vader threw him into the ground with unimaginable strength. Cal tumbled, dropping his lightsaber. Desperately, he reached out with the Force, but his weapon froze mid-air inches from his grasp. Vader was holding it in place, almost effortlessly, as if he had not just been injected with enough voltage to fry a small vehicle. "Surrender the holocron", he demanded.

"I'll never give it to you", Cal cried.

"We shall see". Cal's lightsaber moved of its own accord, and it was already too late when he realized Vader had been the one toying with him. There was no struggle between them when Cal had tried to pull it back - Vader had controlled it from the beginning. The blade ignited in Cal's side, piercing through him. On its own, it was not a fatal blow. He screamed as the heat cauterized the wound.

Vader advances forward. However, a spinning red lightsaber flew in his direction. After he blocked it, Cere leapt through the air, catching the lightsaber and striking at him. "I won't let you take those children". Cere dealt a few blows with Vader before he simply hit her with the hilt of his lightsaber. The force of the blow sent Cere flying careening onto the ground next to Cal. She rose, but there was more than determination in her eyes.

"Such hatred", Vader said. "You would have made an excellent Inquisitor".

Cal struggled to speak but he had to make himself heard by Cere. "She's stronger than that".

Cere put her hands together, drawing on the Force around Vader. Willing it to crush him, to extinguish his life. Vengeance poured off of her. Vader fell to one knee.

“Yes. Strong with the dark side”. He rose, fighting her with his own overwhelming power.

“Cere...” Cal called her.

“I can feel it inside of her”.

Cal drew his lightsaber, limping forward. “Cere, Cere! Hey, listen to me. You still have a choice”.

Cere looked at Cal, and her expression softened. Almost immediately, the energy slowing Vader dissipated, and he lunged forward, stabbing down with his lightsaber. Cere drew on the Force again, but this time it was calm. Pure. The light side. A bubble of protective Force energy enveloped them, but even it could not hold Vader back for long. For all her strength, Cere can only slow him down.

Suddenly, Cal summoned the last bit of his strength and ripped the wall beside them. Water gushed in all around them. He grabbed Cere, who had fallen unconscious from the strain, put the breather on her mouth and made for the surface. Looking back, Vader was holding the water back, preventing it from taking him, but even he could not hold back the ocean and stop Cal at the same time. Halfway up, his strength left him and he felt unconscious. He began to sink back toward the Fortress. Toward death.

In what seemed like a dream, the last thing he saw was a bubble of green...

Chapter 32

END OF THE JOURNEY

"Hey". A small, familiar voice swirled around him. He tried to focus on it. "Hey! Hey, kid".

Cal struggled to open his eyes. The voice got worse. "Cal. Cal!" Everything came back to him. Trilla, the holocron, Vader, the flooding. Cal sat up urgently.

The first thing he could think of was... "Cere".

Greez was sitting next to him. "She's alright. She's alright". BD, too, was there.

"Booooooop beeeeeep".

Cal smiled and patted gently on the droid's head. "Heh. You too". The pain was the last thing to return to him. He grunted. His injuries were bad, but he would survive.

"You did it", Greez said.

"We did it?" Cal couldn't believe it. Only then the enormity of the statement dawned on him. "Ha! We did". He tried to get up.

"Be careful", Greez warned him.

"Where are they?" Cal asked.

"Well they're out there. Whoa, hold on! Wait a minute!" Cal got up at once and left for the kitchen. He stumbled toward the sofa, and Merrin immediately ran up and embraced him in a tight hug. Realizing what she was doing, she pulled back just as suddenly. Not that Cal had minded. "Sorry", she said.

"That was you in the water, wasn't it?" he asked her.

Merrin nodded, a bit shyly. "I'm glad you're okay". She then gestured at BD-1. "This one wouldn't leave your side".

Cal stared at her brown eyes and put one hand on her shoulder. "Thank you". He thought about hugging her for saving his life, but decided that maybe they weren't there

yet. Instead, he walked over to Cere, who was seated on the sofa. She looked as tired as him, but well. There was no trace of the anger he saw in the Fortress in her eyes. "Hey".

"Hey", she said back.

"So now what?" Greez asked.

"Well, Captain", Cere told him. "This is the end of my charter. Your contract has been fulfilled. Thank you, Greez".

He sat next to her. "Well, if it's all the same to you, I was thinking that maybe I would stick around here and... take you wherever you gotta go", he then loudly whispered. "Besides, uh... the kid kinda looks up to me".

Merrin pointed at the holocron. "What about that?"

"We use it", Cere told her. "To rebuild the Jedi Order".

Cal picked up the holocron. It felt heavier knowing that the fate of all the children who had their names there was in his hands. Quite literally at that moment. That *was* Cordova's legacy. The one that he fought so hard to protect. He opened it, and it projected a holo-map.

"The next generation of Jedi..." Merrin said under her breath.

"The Empire will be after them...", Greez pointed out. "Just like they're after us".

"The lives of every child on that list will be forever changed", Cere added.

"Not by us", Cal said suddenly. All of the others looked at him in confusion. He looked over at Cere. She nodded, ever so slightly, and Cal drew his lightsaber. "Their destiny should be trusted to the Force".

With a fluid motion, he cut through the holocron. All the little pieces clattered onto the table, its secrets forever lost. Cal looked around at the *Mantis's* crew. One Latero pilot, a little droid, two survivors of Order 66 and the last Nightsister. A ragtag crew. His friends... His new family. He smiled at them.

"So where to now?"